

Genesis 11:27-12:9 // When God calls, you go

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Date: 06 September 2026

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[0:00] Our reading tonight is from the book of Genesis, starting at chapter 11, from verse 27, then reading to chapter 12, verse 9.

This is the account of Terah's family line. Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan.

But when they came to Haran, they settled there. Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran. Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran.

Terah went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated, and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Morah at Shechem. At that time, the Canaanites were in that land. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, To your offspring, to your offspring I will give this land.

[2:20] So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. From there he went on towards the hills east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and I on the east.

There he built an altar to the Lord, and called on the name of the Lord. Then Abram set out and continued towards the Negev.

Well, thank you very much, Juliet, for reading. And let me add my very warm welcome to you all. And it's brilliant to see you. And welcome to St. Silas if you're visiting.

Well, if you think Christianity begins with the birth of Jesus, you're starting way too late. The Christian gospel begins much further back than that.

In fact, the chapter that we're thinking about this evening, Genesis chapter 12, is one of the most important moments in the whole Bible.

[3:22] Because this is where God begins a great new chapter in his rescue plans for the world. And at the center of it is this man called Abram, who later becomes known as Abraham.

And over the next few months, up until Christmas, we'll be following the story of Abraham and his family through Genesis 12 to 25.

And we're doing that not just because Abram is an important character in the Old Testament, but because he is foundational to the Christian gospel.

So, God makes a promise to Abraham that through his offspring, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

And as the Bible unfolds, that promise gets bigger and bigger and clearer and clearer. God gives Abraham a son. The family grows. And eventually, generations later, one particular descendant arrives, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[4:24] And the New Testament says that the gospel was announced beforehand to Abraham. So, when we open Genesis chapter 12, and it's on page 13, if your Bible's accidentally fallen shut, we're not simply beginning the story of Abraham.

We're watching the beginning of the story that will lead you and lead us to Jesus. We're seeing the gospel in seed form. And wonderfully, that promised seed will eventually come into the world and bring God's blessing to the nations.

And so, tonight, we're looking at the very first thing God asks Abraham to do. Go. And Abraham goes. Which raises a really important question for us.

What does it look like to respond when God calls? What would it look like for you to respond when God calls on your life?

Well, before we go any further, and as we ponder that question, let us bow our heads and join together, asking the Lord for his help. Father, we thank you for your word.

[5:45] We thank you that it is a powerful word and that it accomplishes all that you purpose. We pray that you would send your Holy Spirit to open your word to us, to point us to Jesus and to apply the message of the gospel to our hearts.

Give us ears to hear your voice and the gift of faith to respond to your call. For we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, firstly, God's call. It is a gracious word of promise. Imagine being told to leave everything you've ever known, your country, your home, your family, your support networks, your whole world, and go.

But don't worry about where you're going. I'll show you when you get there. That's essentially what God commands to Abraham in chapter 12, verse 1. Go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land that I will show you.

It's a big ask, isn't it? And before we look at Abraham's response, I want us to notice something fundamental. The whole thing begins with God.

[7:03] God's blessings begin with God's initiative. So look at how verse 1 begins. Now the Lord said to Abraham, God speaks.

And that takes us right the way back to the very beginning of the Bible. The Bible begins with God. Before there is a world, before there is life as we know it, before anything else, there is God.

And God speaks. Let there be light and there is light. God speaks order into chaos. He speaks life into what is empty and formless.

And now, generations later, after humanity has turned away from God, and after sin and death have wrecked havoc on his good creation, after the consequences of rebellion have spread through human lives and societies, the same God speaks again.

Now the Lord said to Abraham, and when God speaks to Abraham, he begins something new. It's a new creative act.

[8:13] The God who created the world by his word now begins his great plan of salvation to rescue and restore and redeem that world by his word.

And notice what God says in verse 2. I will make you a great nation. I will bless you.

I will make your name great. Verse 3. I will bless those who bless you. Do you hear it? I will. God says, I will. I will.

I will. God is making the promises. God is taking the initiative. And that's significant, because we know remarkably little about Abraham before this moment.

He's the son of Terah. He's married to Sarai. He's from Ur. And Joshua later tells us about Abraham's family. He says that Abraham's family worshipped other gods. So the Bible isn't presenting Abraham as someone who's worked out the true God for himself.

[9:21] God comes to Abraham. God speaks. God calls. God promises. God begins the rescue. And that, friends, is how the gospel works.

It begins with God's grace. It begins with his goodness, not our goodness. The gospel doesn't begin with what we do for God.

It begins with what God does for us, what God has done for us. So you don't become a Christian because you finally think you're somehow good enough for God.

You don't earn his favor by cleaning yourself up. You don't somehow persuade God that you're worth saving.

God comes to you. God comes to us. He speaks to us through the gospel. He offers forgiveness. He brings us into his family.

[10:23] And he does it because he is a gracious and merciful God. And that remains true for those of us who have been Christians for years.

Our relationship with God isn't ultimately secured by how well we've performed over this past week or how faithfully we've served or how generously we've given.

And it's not that those things don't matter at all, but they're the response. They're not the foundation. Everything begins with the gracious initiative of God.

And let's look at what that gracious initiative begins to do. God says to Abraham, I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing.

Now, Abraham is an old man. He has no children, no prospects of children. And yet God promises him offspring, a great nation.

[11:30] And God tells him to go to a land that God will show him. So already two great promises are emerging. A people and a place.

And these aren't random promises. They begin to address the wreckage that sin has brought into God's world. So let's think about what happened when humanity rebelled against God.

And in Genesis chapter 3, it leaves humanity with three great problems. Three great problems in Genesis chapter 3.

And Genesis chapter 12 begins to address all three. So let me show you. And I'm going to trace it backwards for us. So first, the land and the ground was cursed and humanity was driven from the garden.

Well, now God promises Abraham a land. Second, offspring. Childbearing was marked by pain and frustration.

[12:40] And here is Abram and Sarai, old childless, with no human prospect of an heir. Well, now God promises Abram offspring, a great nation.

And finally, the serpent, Satan, the great enemy of God and humanity. And right at the heart of Genesis chapter 3, God promises that one day an offspring of the woman would crush the serpent. Well, now in Genesis chapter 12, that promise begins to narrow. The promised offspring will come through Abram. And through Abram's offspring, God will bring blessing and restoration to the world. So Genesis chapter 12 isn't God forgetting about the disaster in Genesis chapter 3. It's God beginning to undo it. Not all at once. Not yet even.

But God has now begun to act to reverse the curse. And then comes the staggering promise, the climax of the promise in verse 3.

[13:51] Through you, Abram, all the peoples of the earth shall be blessed. God blesses Abram so that blessing might flow from God through Abram to the whole world.

And that is where the story of the Bible is heading. Abram, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, David, and finally the Lord Jesus Christ.

The promised offspring of Abraham. And the New Testament, the New Testament makes that absolutely explicit to us.

So in Galatians chapter 3, Paul looks back at this very promise. Through you, all nations will be blessed. And then it says something astonishing.

The gospel was announced beforehand in advance to Abraham. The gospel was preached to Abraham right here in Genesis chapter 12.

[14:57] And Paul goes further than that. He says that the promise was made to Abraham and to his offspring. And then he says that is Christ.

So when God says to Abram, In you all families shall be blessed. He is beginning a plan that will culminate in the Lord Jesus.

And Jesus, Abraham's offspring comes into our cursed and broken world. And where Adam failed, Jesus obeys. Where we have rebelled against God, Jesus remains faithful.

And on the cross, Jesus bears that curse. Dies in our place. He rises again. And so through him, the blessing promised to Abraham reaches the nations.

People who were far off from God can be brought near. People who are under the curse can experience forgiveness. People from every nation and background and circumstance can become one people in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[16:02] So the curse doesn't have the final word. God's blessing does. And that's why Genesis 12 matters. This isn't merely the beginning of Abraham's story.

This is the beginning of God's marvelous rescue plan. And Paul tells us that the promise made here to Abraham was already the gospel.

A people, a place, a blessing. And ultimately, all of it fulfilled through the Lord Jesus Christ. So God comes to us in Christ.

Speaks to us. Speaks to you and I through the gospel. He brings us into his family and promises us a home with him forever. And that brings us to Abraham's response.

Secondly. So how does Abraham respond? What does faith actually look like? In verse 1, God calls Abraham, go.

[17:08] And then in verse 4, so Abraham went. It's remarkably simple, isn't it? God calls. Abraham goes.

And verse 4 continues. So Abraham went as the Lord had told him. And that, friends, is the response of faith. God speaks. God calls.

And Abraham trusts him enough to go. And perhaps that feels just very straightforward when we read it like that. But what does that actually look like for us?

What does that look like in your situation, in your circumstances? Well, a minister down in London called Dick Lucas tells the story of a Christian bringing a friend to see him.

This man had heard the gospel. He had understood the gospel. He said he believed that it was true. But he couldn't make up his mind whether he actually wanted to become a Christian.

[18:12] And after hearing the man's explanation, Dick Lucas simply said, You don't have an option. God commands you to repent.

You don't have an option. And the man repented that very day. Now that might seem rather blunt. But there's something, I think, profoundly biblical about it. Because the gospel, it isn't simply a message to consider.

It's not just an interesting idea to agree with. It is God's call on your life. What are you going to do about it? Gospel, yes, it's an invitation.

But even more than an invitation, it is a summons on you. To respond to the Lord Jesus and what he's done for you. And so if you are here this evening looking in on the Christian faith, exploring Christianity, you can listen to sermons.

[19:20] You can ask lots of questions. You can investigate the evidence. You can think carefully about who Jesus is. And so you should. But there comes a point when investigating Jesus needs to become following Jesus.

And that is what Abram does. God calls. Abram goes. Abram goes. But notice what God was asking him to do.

Abram was 75 years old when he set out. So this isn't an impulsive 20-year-old going on a gap year, seeking an adventure, if nothing else better to do with his life.

Abram has a settled life. He has a family. He has possessions. A whole bunch of them. It sounds like in verse 5, sounds like they needed a fleet of removal lorries and shipping containers lined up on the driveway.

He has a whole network of relationships and responsibilities. And God says, go. Go from your country, your people, and your father's house. Go. Leave the familiar.

[20:26] Leave the comfort. Leave the security. Leave the life you've built. And go to a place that I will show you. And notice what God doesn't give him.

He doesn't give him a full itinerary. He doesn't say, here's where you're going. Here's what will happen along the way. Here's how everything will pan out. He simply says, go. And Abram goes. That's faith. Faith doesn't mean having every question answered. It doesn't mean knowing exactly what the future holds all along the way. But it isn't blind faith either.

Faith means trusting God because of what God has revealed about himself through the scriptures. And then acting on that trust.

Faith doesn't mean knowing all that lies ahead. It means trusting the one who does. And that's exactly what Hebrews 11 says about Abram.

[21:29] By faith, Abraham went called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance. Abram obeyed and went.

Even though he didn't know where he was going. He didn't know where he was going, but he trusted the God who speaks. That means real cost.

Sometimes. Because following Jesus will sometimes mean leaving behind things that are familiar, things that are comfortable. Even things and people sometimes that we love.

Abram left his country, left his people, his culture, the life he had known. And following Jesus may cost us dearly too.

Jesus doesn't say, come to me and carry on with your life just as exactly as it was before. Just add me into your life. Jesus isn't an optional bolt-on.

[22:37] He says, whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. So the Christian life isn't simply about getting a ticket to heaven and just carrying on with your life as it was before.

Jesus calls us to follow him. It means our priorities change. Our ambitions change. Our attitudes change.

Our relationships change. The things we once lived for may no longer be the things that we now live for. Our whole outlook changes.

And sometimes following Jesus will mean real cost. Will mean making costly choices because we trust that he is worth infinitely more than what he's asking us to leave behind.

So there is a cost. But look at what happens next. Abram leaves his old life and begins a new walk with God.

[23 : 46] Wherever he goes we see something new. In verse 7 in Shechem in the very heartlands of the Canaanites Abram builds an altar to the Lord. And verse 8 between Bethel and Ai there he builds an altar to the Lord and calls upon the name of the Lord.

So his faith produces a new direction and a new worship a new experience of God. He's no longer living for the gods of his old life. He's walking with the living God.

And that's what genuine faith looks like. Not merely believing something in your head. But beginning to walk in a new direction.

Because you have come to trust the God who speaks. And notice something else. God doesn't give Abram the whole story.

Abram never gets to see everything God has promised him. He doesn't see the great nation. He doesn't see all the families of the earth breast through his offspring. God is doing something far bigger than one lifetime.

[24 : 54] Abram simply hears God's word. Trusts God's promise. And takes the next step. And that is often what the Christian life looks like.

God doesn't show us the whole road ahead. He gives us enough light for the next step. We don't know everything that will happen to us. We don't know what joys or sorrows lie ahead.

We don't know how every prayer will be answered. We don't know how our small acts of faithfulness will be in light of eternity. What impact they may have. But we do know who has called us.

We know what he's promised. So faith goes. God calls. You trust. And you go.

And if you're here tonight exploring the Christian faith. Perhaps that's the question for you. Not simply do I understand everything.

[25 : 58] Not have I answered every possible question that I can think of. But am I willing to follow Jesus? Am I willing to take that step?

Because at some point, faith moves. And for those of us who have been following Jesus for years, the same question remains.

Are you willing to keep on following Jesus? Are you willing to take those steps of faith? Are there places where we're clinging to the familiar because we're afraid to trust him with the unknown?

Are there things we know that Jesus is calling us to leave behind but we're reluctant to let go? Do we sense that he's something that he's calling us towards but we're afraid of what that might mean for us in our situation?

Let me finish with a story. Bobby Macri grew up in Glasgow in the 1950s.

[27 : 08] He had an incredibly difficult childhood. He turned to drink and drugs and eventually ended up in hospital long term with alcoholism. His marriage was falling apart and the doctors were warning him that if he carried on like that, he didn't have very long to live.

Weeks or months perhaps at best they thought. The Christian minister came to visit him and asked him, Have you ever heard of the Lord Jesus?

Bobby hadn't. But that night he prayed. And he basically said, Jesus, I have no idea who you are. No idea if you're even there.

But if you are there, you need to help me. Because if you don't, I'm going to die. And that night, that very night, something incredible happened because his life was changed quite remarkably.

Came out of hospital, came to faith in Jesus and never went back to the drink or the drugs. And the doctors just couldn't understand why there was no withdrawal symptoms.

[28 : 23] Well, sometime later, he went along to a church meeting where a woman was talking about missionary work in Malawi. She was talking about the need for people to go and help among those struggling with drink and drugs.

And Bobby thought, Fantastic! People are needed there. So he picked up a contact card and a couple of days later, he phoned the number. He told no one about it, not even his wife. And a very posh voice came over the phone. He asked, How may I help you? And Bobby said, This is Bobby McAbee. I'm phoning about Malawi and the need for workers out there and the drink and the drugs.

And then he said, I'm ready. I'm ready to go. I'll go and help the wee women. And the man on the other end of the phone, as you can imagine, was quite bemused. He said, Okay, well that's lovely. Let me just ask you a few questions. Have you ever been to a Bible college? And Bobby said, No, not been to a Bible college, but I do go to a Bible study every Thursday night at church.

[29 : 31] Right. And tell me, do you speak any languages? Languages. And Bobby said, Languages? Languages? Are you kidding me, son? Do you not hear the way I'm speaking to you the new?

I can barely speak English. And a poor chap on the other end of the phone couldn't help but laugh. Malawi was not where the Lord was calling Bobby Macri.

But the Lord was calling Bobby Macri. And over the next few years, Bobby went back to school. And there he studied English alongside his Bible training.

And eventually he was invited to Manchester to work with a Manchester City mission in Withenshaw, one of the largest and most deprived schemes in all Europe.

And there he went. And he served there as an inner city missionary for the next 15 years in Manchester. And there's a picture of him years later from that serving at the Keswick Convention a few years ago.

[30 : 34] Bobby didn't know where God was taking him. He didn't know the whole plan. He didn't know what it would all entail. He just knew that Jesus was calling him. And he was ready and willing to go.

Perhaps that's where Genesis 12 leaves us tonight. Abram didn't know every twist and turn in the road ahead. Bobby didn't know every twist and turn in the road ahead.

And neither do we. But we do know where the road is ultimately leading. Jesus has promised to bring his people home, to resurrection life, to the restored land of the new creation, to be with him forever.

We know the destination. We just don't know every step along the way. And so faith trusts him with the next step. God spoke.

Abram trusted. Abram went. And Jesus calls you to follow him in exactly the same way. So trust him and go.

[31 : 49] Let's take a moment there to pause and respond in our hearts to the Lord's call on our lives. And if you're here tonight, you've never put your trust in the Lord Jesus, perhaps tonight is the moment to respond to him.

You don't need to have every question covered. But if you're ready to follow Jesus and put your trust in him, you can do that tonight. And if you do, we'd love to speak to you and pray with you afterwards.

Living God, we thank you that you know each one of us here. And that in Jesus Christ, you have called us to yourself.

Thank you that your call is a gracious call. You've done everything necessary to restore us to yourself through the Lord Jesus Christ. So help us.

Help us to respond with the response of faith. Help us to trust you for every step along the way. Help us to follow Jesus, leaving behind the things that keep us from him and trusting him with the things that we cannot yet see.

[33 : 00] And with the same powerful voice that spoke creation into being, speak your life into our broken lives. Recreate us, renew us, refresh us, make us more like Jesus and lead us home.

We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen.