

Amazing Truths of the Pentateuch (7)
The Dawning of New Hope and Blessing for all Peoples
(Genesis 11:31- 12:9)

Introduction:-

The narrative of Genesis 1-11 has been aptly described as one of "Creation - Uncreation - Recreation", by the time that we finally arrive at the genealogy of Shem, the firstborn of Noah, after the flood. Interestingly enough, the genealogy of Shem deliberately frames the Tower of Babel story at Genesis 11:1-9 on both sides, indicating that the collective pride and failure of humankind to fulfil the command of Genesis 1:28, to "be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth", by also trying to "make a name for themselves", will be reversed through the calling of Abraham, through the genealogy of Shem, whose promise of a fivefold blessing at Genesis 12:2-3, will not only reverse the fivefold curse found in Genesis 1-11, but will also receive the blessing of God. God will now "make a name for Abraham", who will not only fulfil the command of God at Genesis 1:28, but as a nation, will become the means of providing a blessing to the peoples of the earth. And so our passage today, not only suggests the theme of recreation, but it ranks as the key to the rest of the Old Testament, and to the entire Bible!! Let us now take a closer look at this most amazing passage, as we trace Abraham's pilgrimage in three stages, represented by three geographical markers.

1. The Beginning of the Journey - Ur of the Chaldeans (Genesis 11:31)

All faith journeys have a beginning. And after the flood, God decided to bless the world through one faithful line, whose genealogy can be traced all the way back to Seth, who replaced the righteous Abel. In those days, people began to call upon the Lord at Genesis 5:25-26. Finally through this Godly line, Noah was born, as a righteous and blameless man, who walked with God. Noah in turn fathered Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and from these came all the people scattered over the face of the earth, chronologically leading from the Tower of Babel, to the Table of Nations mentioned at Genesis chapter 10. And so, even through the righteous Noah, only one faithful line continued to emerge, whose faith was open to God, this time through Shem. And so, when the story of Abraham opens up at Genesis 11:31, according to Acts 7:2-3, Abraham's call began in Ur of the Chaldeans. And even though it is Terah, Abraham's father, who appears to take the initiative in the text, here it is likely that the initial call did come to Abraham, and then Abraham persuaded his father to accompany him. Then the father, according to Patriarchal propriety, became the official leader of the party as Genesis 11:31 records. But think of all that must have happened to arrive at this point. Archaeological evidence suggests that Abraham's world was prosperous and progressive, undoubtedly making his leaving home all the more difficult. Genesis does not portray him as one with an adventurous spirit, easily given to moving. We may be sure that he would have much preferred to remain in surroundings he knew, where he could enjoy old friends and comfortable living conditions. But he heeded God's call, and this indicates his remarkable faith. What gave reinforcement and steel to this faith? I believe that we catch a glimpse of this at Hebrews 11:8-10, and then at Hebrews 12:22-24. Abraham had a vision of even greater things to come, that would even eclipse his call to temporarily settle in tents within the promised land! Why, he looked for a city, whose builder and maker is God!! Today in Israel, people are building mansions!! Ur for Abraham was the place of fleeting pleasures, in the light of greater things to come. Ur speaks of the

need to let go of the past, and to embrace the greater things of God. Some people have such a tight hold of the past, that they cannot embrace with open arms the future and all that God wants to give them. Perhaps in our pilgrimage today we are still at home in the Ur of the Chaldeans spiritually. What will it take on our part to move with God, and take that first step of faith, no matter how small and seemingly faltering, in fulfilment of his will for us? I will never forget the words of Neil Armstrong back on July 20th, 1969, as the first man to land on the moon - "One small step for man - one giant step for mankind" - Nothing less than this was Abraham's first step of faith in leaving Ur, the place he called home, for the sake of the kingdom of God. It is also the same for us.

2. The Middle Point of the Journey - Haran (Genesis 11:31-12:5)

In this section, Haran represents the middle point of the journey to the promised land. And here, the call of God was renewed to Abraham, possibly after his father Terah died there, which would have made the leaving of Haran all the more difficult for Abraham. And so the Harans of this world remind us that we are prone to stop, and settle down, in our journey with God. And when we do, we lose the larger perspective of God's call upon our lives. But we must always remember that the Harans in our faith journey are only the mid-way points, and not the end of our journey with God, as Abraham had to be reminded in this account. In Pilgrim's progress, Christian had to be reminded that there are many "By-Ways" on our faith journey with God, which are wide and crooked, and not be followed. But the road to eternal life takes us on the narrow path, a route pioneered by the prophets, Christ, and the Apostles. Finally in this section, some places and experiences are necessary stages in our pilgrimage with God, but we must be reminded that our Harans must ultimately be vacated and left behind as well. Possibly in this section, the greatest verse is found at verse 4, when after God had renewed his call to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, with all its potential of blessing for both Abraham and the world, we read the words, "So Abraham had left, as the Lord had told him" - How enormous would that prompt obedience grounded in faith prove to be at this point, for the blessing of the world. And this same point may be applied to our lives today. Is someone else's blessing from God dependent upon a step of obedience in our lives today?

3. The Final Point of the Journey - The Promised Land (Genesis 12:6-9)

Finally, the Promised Land is our ultimate destination. Notice that when Abraham left Haran, he was 75 years of age. And because of his obedience, he spent the next 100 years in the Promised Land itself, finally dying at 175 years of age. There is something highly symbolic about this point, which may suggest the gift of blessing and of eternal life itself. Further, when Abraham reached the Promised Land, he did the most missionary thing that he could have done in a new land. First, at Shechem, in the very centre of the land, he built an altar to the Lord, followed by a further altar near Bethel, where Jacob, the founding father of the twelve tribes of Israel, would later encounter the Lord. In this way, Abraham built a visible witness to his faith in the Lord within this new land. At the same time, Abraham's pilgrim faith and story was bounded by obedience and worship. Finally, the altar would also become the place of Abraham's greatest test of covenant faith with the sacrifice of Isaac at Genesis 22:1-19. As a result of this, God's blessing to Abraham and the nations was sealed and assured. Can our lives likewise be bounded by obedience and worship, that will also assure God's blessing to the nations through us? Will the altars that we

build and worship at, define our lives to the very end, and continue to witness to our faith within a dry and thirsty land?

Conclusion:-

Andrew Kuyvenhoven in his devotional book "Daylight" (1977) has this excellent word about Abraham, slightly modified, "The altar marks the point where God has spoken and where Abram has responded in faith. Altars are the sites where Abram met his God. All the dangers and delights of the long trip may be omitted from the record. But the erection of the altars is important (Note the significance of Noah's altar building immediately after the flood at Genesis 8:20-22, followed by God's covenant blessings at Genesis 9:1-17). Here, then, is an outstanding feature of a life that is lived with God. The progress is not measured by miles or ordinary events. All that may be overlooked when the account is written. But the points that must be mentioned are the occasions for altar building. Therefore the life that is lived with God remains a mystery to the outsider. Every other life is lived from diploma to promotion to pay-check. People measure their journeys by the houses they lived in, the successes and honours they have achieved, and the travels they have made. But the life of the person who lives with God is measured from altar to altar. Such a life reaches its goal when God's presence is uninterrupted and when His last promise is fulfilled. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God, my exceeding joy; and I will praise thee ... O God, my God" (Psalm 43:4).

Amen