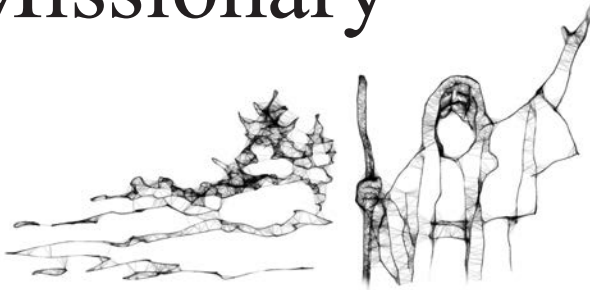


Abraham: The First Missionary



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 12:1–3; 14:8–24; Gal. 3:6; Heb. 11:8–19; Gen. 12:6, 7; 18:18, 19.*

Memory Text: “So also Abraham ‘believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you’ ” (*Galatians 3:6–8, NIV*).

It's no coincidence that three of the world's major faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are sometimes called the “Abrahamic faiths.” That's because all three, in one way or another, trace their roots back to this great man of God.

Though Abraham is admired as the defining example of faithfulness, this week's lesson will examine this faithfulness from a different angle. That is, we want to view him as a missionary, as someone called by the Lord to go to another land and witness to the people about the true God, the Creator and Redeemer.

God gave Abraham, and his family after him (*see Gal. 3:29*), a three-fold purpose: (1) to be recipients and guardians of the divine truth of God's kingdom that had been lost in the earlier history of humankind; (2) to be the channel through which the Redeemer would enter history; and (3) to be, as God's faithful servants, a light to the nations, a light to those who needed to know the Lord.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 11.

The Call of Abraham

“The LORD had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you’ ” (Gen. 12:1–3, NIV).

Abram—whose name meant “the father is exalted” and whose name was changed to Abraham, “the father of multitudes”—grew up in Ur, in what is now Iraq. God called him to separate himself from his familiar social and spiritual context and migrate to an unfamiliar country, where God conducted a 100-year spiritual makeover, turning him into the “father of the faithful.” In the midst of personal and family struggles, Abraham became a prototype missionary to several people groups and a respected leader who witnessed to his faith in God.

Read through Genesis 12:1–3. What principles can you find here that could apply to any of us in our own particular situation; that is, what did Abraham experience that we might experience in our own way, as well? See also Heb. 11:8–10.

The patriarch was called to leave his past behind him, to step out in faith, to believe what seemed unbelievable, to do what God had called him to do. And as a result of his faithfulness, all the nations of the world would be blessed.

Many of us are tested, as was Abraham. Of course, we might not hear the voice of God speaking directly to us, but He calls us by the teachings of His Word and the events of His providence. We may be required to abandon a career that promises wealth and honor; we might have to leave congenial and profitable associations and separate from family; indeed, we might have to enter upon what appears only to be a path of self-denial, hardship, and sacrifice. But if called, how can we refuse?

In Genesis, the Hebrew reads literally, “And God said to Abram, ‘Go for yourself from your land.’ ” He was told to go “for himself”; that is, for his own sake. How should we understand what that means, and how can we apply it to ourselves?

Abraham’s Testimony to the Kings

Lot was a relative of Abraham and accompanied him on some of his travels. His choice of the well-watered Jordan valley brought him into the company of the wicked men in Sodom (*Gen. 13:1–13*). He was then rescued first by Abraham (*Gen. 14:11–16*) and later by two angels (*Genesis 19*).

When Abraham heard that his relative, Lot, was in trouble, he decided to help him. In rescuing Lot, Abraham headed a military force of more than three hundred men of his own household. Numerous kings were involved in the battle for Sodom, and Abraham came out the victor.

Read Genesis 14:8–24. What did Abraham’s actions say about his character and, hence, about his faith and his God?

To the kings he conquered, Abraham revealed the power of God. Even during this rescue mission, the “father of the faithful” did not lose his divine call to be a blessing to the nations.

“The worshiper of Jehovah had not only rendered a great service to the country, but had proved himself a man of valor. It was seen that righteousness is not cowardice, and that Abraham’s religion made him courageous in maintaining the right and defending the oppressed. His heroic act gave him a widespread influence among the surrounding tribes. On his return, the king of Sodom came out with his retinue to honor the conqueror. He bade him take the goods, begging only that the prisoners should be restored. By the usage of war, the spoils belonged to the conquerors; but Abraham had undertaken this expedition with no purpose of gain, and he refused to take advantage of the unfortunate, only stipulating that his confederates should receive the portion to which they were entitled.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 135.

Think about your dealings with others. What kind of witness do they present to others about your faith?

Exemplar of Faith

Though hardly perfect, Abraham was a man of God, and time and again in the Bible, even in the New Testament, he is used as an example of faithfulness and of what it means to be saved by faith (*see Gen. 15:6, Gal. 3:6*).

Read Hebrews 11:8–19. What does it tell us about Abraham and his faith that is so important for anyone who wants to be a missionary for God in whatever capacity possible?

The Lord wanted to use Abraham, but the first thing He had to do was get him to leave his past behind. The lesson there should be obvious to any of us, especially those of us who have pasts not in harmony with the will and law of God, which actually includes us all.

Amazing, too, was the fact that though Abraham left, “he did not know where he was going” (*Heb. 11:8, NIV*). Though most missionaries know where they are going, at least in a geographical sense, in another sense when we take a giant leap of faith and give our hearts totally to God, we really don’t know (at least in the short run) where we will wind up (though in the long run, we have absolute assurance). If we did know, it wouldn’t require that much faith; hence, not knowing is prerequisite for truly being able to live by faith.

Another crucial point here is that Abraham was looking to “the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (*vs. 10, NIV*). Abraham kept the big picture in mind; he knew that whatever he faced here, whatever toils and struggles, it would all be worth it in the end.

He knew, too, that he wasn’t just a stranger in “the promised land” but that he was one of many “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (*vs. 13, NKJV*). This world, and our lives in it, as precious as they appear to us now (it’s all we have now), are not the whole story, not by a long shot.

And, of course, the greatest example of faith in the Old Testament was what Abraham was willing to do to his son on Mount Moriah at the command of God.

In what ways have you experienced what it means to step out in faith? What hardships have you faced? What joys have you experienced? Knowing what you know now, what might you have done differently?

Abraham, the Wanderer

A study of Abraham's life reveals that his faith included difficult struggles against doubt and disbelief in God's power. Abraham's ancestors were idolaters (*Josh. 24:2*), and perhaps this background explains why he did not always have full confidence in God's power. Twice he showed cowardice and told Sarah to tell only a half-truth (*Gen. 12:11–13, 20:2*). He laughed (*Gen. 17:17*) when he was told that he would have a son with Sarah. Despite his faults, Abraham was still used by the Lord because Abraham wanted to be used by Him; and thus, the Lord was able to mold His character.

One means God used to shape Abraham into a reformer and missionary was his many wanderings. Traveling is an education in itself. It opens a person to new ideas and the possibilities of change. Pilgrimages to Jerusalem were an important and required part of Israelite worship. The changes the pilgrims experienced when they had to walk distances, sleep in other places, eat different food, encounter another climate, and meet other people enhanced their faith by their vulnerability. Their worship, with its sacrifices and offerings, sacred dances, and reciting of psalms, helped God's people to confirm their identity and traditions.

In his travels from his birthplace in Ur to his burial site in Hebron, Abraham visited at least 15 different geographical areas. Most of the important reforming and missionary episodes in his life are connected with his journeys.

What were some of the spiritual lessons that Abraham experienced in the following places?

Moreh at Shechem (*Gen. 12:6, 7*) _____

Hebron (*Gen. 13:18–14:20*) _____

Mamre (*Gen. 18:1, 20–33*) _____

Mount Moriah (*Gen. 22:1–14*) _____

Abraham: A Missionary in His Own House

“ ‘Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him’ ” (*Gen. 18:18, 19, NIV*). What important lessons about faithfulness and serving God do we find in these texts?

“God called Abraham to be a teacher of His word, He chose him to be the father of a great nation, because He saw that Abraham would instruct his children and his household in the principles of God’s law. And that which gave power to Abraham’s teaching was the influence of his own life. His great household consisted of more than a thousand souls, many of them heads of families, and not a few but newly converted from heathenism.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 187.

Missionary activities will be more successful when they are backed by a family life that is in harmony with the designs of God. Bible history and church history tell us that most early Christian churches were house- and family-based. One of the reasons Abraham was chosen was that God saw his ability to direct his children and his household in the way of the Lord. God’s purpose in the family equals His purpose in missions; namely, “to do what is right and just” (*Prov. 21:3, NIV*).

What examples of Abraham’s family can you find that showed that they were faithful to the Lord? See, for example, *Heb. 11:11, 20*.

Of course, in the Bible we can also find examples of godly men whose families didn’t follow the way of the Lord. Nevertheless, the point of the texts for today is clear: Abraham’s faith and example were strong enough that those of his household learned to “keep the way of the LORD” (*Gen. 18:19*).

To “keep the way of the LORD.” What does that phrase mean to you? How are we to “keep the way of the LORD”?

Further Study: “God called Abraham, and prospered and honored him; and the patriarch’s fidelity was a light to the people in all the countries of his sojourn. Abraham did not shut himself away from the people around him. He maintained friendly relations with the kings of the surrounding nations, by some of whom he was treated with great respect; and his integrity and unselfishness, his valor and benevolence, were representing the character of God. In Mesopotamia, in Canaan, in Egypt, and even to the inhabitants of Sodom, the God of heaven was revealed through His representative.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 368.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 For thousands of years, the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah has thrilled and challenged the faithful while evoking scorn and ridicule among those who have seen it as an act of cruelty and barbarity. Read the story over again in Genesis 22. What great lessons can we take from it? What does it teach us about the Cross and the terrible cost of sin? What does it teach us about what taking a leap of faith entails? Why is the story so troubling to many?
- 2 Read Genesis 12:11–13, 20:2, two accounts where Abraham, a man of God, showed a lack of faith. What can we take away from these stories?
- 3 One of the most famous texts in the Bible is Genesis 15:6. What does it say? In what context is it given? How is this text used in the New Testament (see Rom. 4:3, Gal. 3:6, James 2:23)? What does it teach us about faith, works, and salvation?
- 4 Who were some of the great religious leaders whose family members didn’t follow in “the way of the LORD”? What can we learn from their stories that can encourage anyone who struggles with helping family members be faithful?

The Gun Would Not Fire: Part 2

by MAX DE LOS REYES, THE PHILIPPINES

Lem was a soldier, and his assignments often took him away from home. When he was home, he spent much time and money drinking with his friends.

One day Lem's buddies began teasing him about his wife's interest in religion. "What's the matter, Lem?" one man challenged. "Couldn't you keep your wife from joining that church?" As the teasing grew more intense, Lem became agitated.

"You're wrong!" he finally blustered. "I'll prove to you that I can control my wife!" With those words Lem swaggered out of the bar and headed home.

That afternoon Fernando had been visiting homes of people interested in studying the Bible. He wasn't far from Julie's home when he decided to stop by to make sure Julie still planned on his visit the next day. As he neared her house, Fernando was startled by a loud blast that sounded like a gunshot. At first, he was not concerned about it, but when another shot rang out, he looked around to see who was shooting.

Just then he saw Julie running toward him. "Run! Get away!" she shouted. "Lem's trying to kill you!"

Fernando took cover behind a large tree. He knew that Lem was an expert marksman, and if the man wanted to hit Fernando, he could do so easily. Julie ran back toward the house where she found her husband angrily yanking at his gun, trying to remove a bullet that had lodged in the barrel. As Julie saw what he was doing, she grew bold. "Lem, you know that God jammed your gun so you couldn't hurt Fernando!"

None of Lem's efforts could unjam the gun. Surprised by this unexpected turn of events, Lem put the gun down and listened to Julie explain how God had worked to save His messenger from death. When he cooled down and sobered up, Lem admitted that his wife was right. Fernando had done nothing to harm him.

Lem no longer objects when his wife and children attend church services. He has accepted Fernando's friendship and has agreed to Bible studies. He has told his drinking buddies that he is glad his family attends church, and they have stopped teasing him.

Those who witnessed the events of that day agree that God truly worked a miracle to save Fernando's life. But the change in Lem's heart is no less of a miracle.

MAX DE LOS REYES *was the executive secretary of the Mountain Provinces Mission in the Philippines when this was written.*

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Hebrews 11:8*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: See clearly from Abraham’s life how God uses obedience, however flawed or incomplete, to dramatically further His mission plan.

Feel: Gain a fresh sense of excitement about the mission adventure that God has in mind for him or her.

Do: Be challenged to take risks and to become personally vulnerable for the sake of the gospel.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Adventure, With a Safety Net

A What would happen to the Bible if the story of Abraham were removed? How does this help us to understand the importance of the mission God assigned to Abraham?

B What do we learn about God’s nature from Abraham’s many missteps?

C Why do you think God engineered so many close encounters with Abraham at different points along his journey?

II. Feel: Mission Possible

A Are we allowing a sense of inadequacy to hold us back from engaging in mission? What lessons from Abraham’s experience should give us the confidence to launch out?

B How does Abraham’s enduring connection with God bring us reassurance and comfort when we feel like “strangers in a strange land”?

III. Do: Transformed Through Mission

A How can we do mission rather than simply be “thinkers” or “talkers” about mission? What will that mean for us, in a practical sense?

B As we look at Abraham at the beginning of his journey and then again at the end, what clues can we find about what God would like to achieve in our lives if we’ll let Him?

► **Summary:** In many ways, Abraham’s mission journey prefigures Christ’s redemptive mission to bless the world through His sacrifice at Calvary. As we trace Abraham’s footsteps, we catch glimpses of the mission-minded nature of God, and we’re inspired to discover the mission purpose God has planned for us.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Galatians 3:6–8*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Through faith, Abraham accepted a mission from God that took him on an extraordinary journey—one whose consequences he could never have imagined. Today, God offers each one of us a mission assignment in His plan for the salvation of humanity. Like Abraham, we may not be “ideal” missionary material. But his story assures us that God can and will achieve His purpose through flawed humans. All He asks is that we be ready to “Go.”

Just for Teachers: The Christian as pilgrim or exile is a recurring image in Christian literature and music. Perhaps the clearest example of someone called on a pilgrimage is Abraham, who responded to God’s call to leave everything he knew (*Gen. 12:1*). In leading your class today, your purpose should be twofold: to draw key lessons for mission from Abraham’s epic journey of faith and to challenge the class to listen for, and to accept, God’s personal call to mission—whatever form that may take.

Opening Discussion: British explorer Sir Francis Drake sailed from England in December 1577 with six ships and 164 sailors. His mission? To become the first Englishman to circumnavigate the globe. Three years later, just one ship crewed by 59 surviving sailors limped into Plymouth Harbor. While ultimately successful in their mission, Sir Francis and his men had endured a litany of horrors—storms, shipwrecks, attacks by hostile forces, and starvation.

In light of his terrible journey, the words of a prayer traditionally attributed to Sir Francis seem especially poignant: “Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves. When our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little. When we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.”

When Abraham set out from Ur, he was beginning a journey that would take him “far from shore”—and seemingly without assurance of success. Of course, hindsight makes the outcome seem inevitable. Abraham was a giant of faith; a fearless explorer; the father of nations, both literal and spiritual. But consider how the story could have taken a very different turn. When Abram of Ur first heard God’s voice telling him to “Go,” he was simply a man faced with a choice. Should he ignore the Lord’s prompting and stay in Ur, with all that was familiar and secure? Or should he uproot himself and his extended household and head into the unknown? At the time, he could never have known how the consequences of his choice would ripple down through history.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Before any epic journey comes a decision to go, how can we live in such a way that (a) makes it easier to hear God’s call to mission and (b) ensures we’re physically and spiritually ready to respond to the mission assignment that God gives us?
- ❷ In what ways do we either individually or as a church “sail too close to shore” when it comes to engaging in God’s mission?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The great men and women of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11, including Abraham, all had a deep confidence in God’s long-range plan for humanity. This assurance allowed them to embrace vulnerability, sacrifice, and danger. As you explore the biblical narrative of Abraham, prompt your class to ask: “What things do I need to leave behind—fears, material possessions, sins, or anything else—in order to fulfill God’s plan for me to bless others?”

Bible Commentary**I. Blessing the World** (*Review Genesis 12:1–9 with your class.*)

The theme of blessing weaves through the Bible with God showing Himself as anxious to bless the world. God blesses Abraham for a specific and monumental purpose—to bless all nations through him (*Gen. 12:2, 3*). Could there be a higher calling? Right from the start of the history of Israel, God signals His intention to bless the whole world. He chooses Israel not because they’re inherently special, not because they’re better than others, but so they can be His instrument of salvation and blessing to the world.

Abraham proved himself in some ways to be a fallible human. But his incredible faith earns him a prominent place among the heroes of faith (*Heb. 11:8–19*). Courage mixed with faith as Abraham, his family, and entourage moved as missionaries into the heart of Canaan—surrounded by immoral idol worshippers (*Gen. 12:4–6*). How would they even begin to witness of Yahweh in such surroundings?

Abraham builds two altars. Of course, performing sacrifices was nothing strange in the land of Canaan—but claiming to sacrifice to the One true God, Yahweh, was something startlingly new! And then the Bible says that Abraham “called on the name of the LORD” (*vs. 8, NKJV*). Young’s Literal Translation suggests a deeper meaning in this verse: Abraham “preacheth in the name of Jehovah.” Abraham was not only called to go

and live a life faithful to the promise, he was called to be a verbal witness to the Canaanite peoples.

Consider This: Abraham stood in a “privileged” relationship with God—yet, this bestowed on him as many responsibilities as it did blessings. For Seventh-day Adventists, what are some of the responsibilities that accompany the many blessings God has given us?

II. Reciprocal Blessings *(Review Genesis 12:1–3 with your class.)*

Blessings in the Bible flow two ways—from God to humanity and from humanity back to God. God’s blessings are to care for us as His children; our blessing is to express our thanks and appreciation for His blessings. This mutual, reciprocal blessing can be seen in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (*Eph. 1:3, NRSV*).

In the uneven mutual exchange of blessings, the only things of value we can give back to God are our lives, our service, and our praise.

The greatest blessing Israel could have given back to God was their obedience, including participation in His mission to the surrounding nations. Instead, too often, they got caught up in empty ritual. Sacrifices and offerings, which were supposed to be blessings back to God, instead became as an insult to Him (*Isa. 1:13–15*).

Consider This: In what tangible ways might God call us to bless our community? In what ways are we sometimes distracted from our mission to bless God and others?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: It has been said that being a missionary means being open to being changed, as much as you seek to change others. Abraham’s mission encompasses both a physical journey (from the ancient city of Ur into the land of Canaan) and a journey of spiritual growth (leaving behind a culture of idolatry and learning how to be a faithful follower of Yahweh). Explore with your class the idea that perfection isn’t a job requirement for mission work. What’s needed instead is a teachable spirit.

Activity: Divide the class into small groups and ask them to spend a few minutes writing a short job description for the “career” to which God called Abraham. List all the qualifications and skills you believe an ideal candidate should possess. Come together as a group and compare your lists. What

consensus can you come to regarding the two or three most essential qualifications? What characteristics would be detrimental?

Discussion Questions:

Briefly review the various episodes in Abraham's life that show he was a spiritual work in progress. (*For instance, Gen. 12:11–13, 16:1–4, 20:2.*)

- ❶ How would you characterize God's response to these situations?
- ❷ Why do you think God was so patient with His flawed ambassador? How does 1 Timothy 1:16 provide a clue to one reason?
- ❸ How do you respond to the idea that God's power is displayed in our weakness (*2 Cor. 12:9*)? Does this have a practical impact on our attitude to mission involvement?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: We often hear stirring tales of men and women who've felt a distinct, unmistakable sense that God wanted them to serve in some special way. Yet, we are all "called" (*John 15:16*). Explore with your class the many different ways God communicates His call to mission.

Activity: Is it possible to become better attuned to God's mission promptings? Choose two or three individuals in your class to enact a charade. Choose an abstract idea for them to portray—such as compassion or hope—through actions only.

1. Is it easier for us to guess the message when the actors are people we know very well (that is, we're in tune with how they think)? Why, or why not?

2. Would it be easier to guess the message if we received clues about it from multiple sources? Explain. (Perhaps if the actors were also allowed to talk, or draw a picture?)

For now, God's communication with us can't be face-to-face. As a class, discuss ways we can be more in tune with God's voice. What various forms can God's call take?

In closing, challenge members of the class to set aside specific blocks of time in the coming week—whether through study, prayer, worship, or fellowship—to do the following:

- (a) Listen for God's personal call to mission.
- (b) Prepare spiritually to be ready for service.