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Rick R. Marrs
rick.marrs@pepperdine.edu

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Embracing the Call of God: Genesis 12.1-4a

RICK R. MARRS

We live in a fascinating world—we drink deeply from the well of the American dream that tells us we can be “anything we want to be.” However, deep in our hearts we know that simply isn’t true. And so, many of us spend inordinate amounts of time and energy wondering aloud: What should I do? What should I become? And although others may put pressure on us, the one thing the American dream tells us is that no one, absolutely no one (parents included) has a right to tell us what we can or cannot be!

And so the text before us presents us with a problem! It is a text central to our faith, and yet it unapologetically rejects the American dream! It calls into question who chooses our vocation—vocation not in the sense of ITT Technical (i.e., how we pay the bills), but in the classic sense of our “calling from God.” We are not the first generation to experience this tension—tension between the dreams expounded by our culture and the affirmations of our faith. Yet, we love this text.

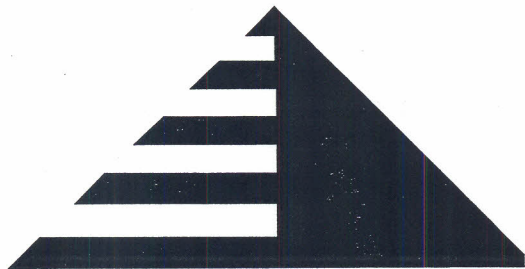
BACKDROP TO GENESIS 12:1-4A—“THE MESOPOTAMIAN DREAM”

It must have been a marvelous sight. The ultimate skyscraper, scaffolding ascending to the sky as far as the eye could see. Mesopotamians paused daily to look at this “first wonder of the world” in the making. The rumors ran rampant through the community—it would have a viewing platform, complete with a five-star restaurant on top. At its highest point, you could look out and look God in the eye! Truly this accomplishment would make them famous—they would “make their name.”

However, this was only the beginning of their dreams and schemes. Surrounding this towering edifice they began to lay out their city. Gated communities proliferated; in the center of this city there was even a local pub where they could go and “everyone knew their name.”

Their quest for security and fame was well within reach. Adam and Eve may have lost a garden; Cain may have lost his land; the flood victims even lost their lives; but these ambitious builders would circumvent all that—they would find security through their common language, their common culture, and their common location. They would live out the Mesopotamian dream and their *total* dependency upon the creator of the universe would be removed.

The plan seemed foolproof. And then the Lord of the heavens “came down” to view this monument to human achievement and accomplishment. Where these builders saw the potential for fame and security, God saw self-absorption and self-destiny. Where they saw a recipe for phenomenal success, God saw the seeds of human pride. And so, as he had in his dealings with Adam and Eve, and with Cain, and with the rampant social violence prior to the flood, God acted decisively and dramatically.



Their language was confused; scattering resulted. No longer having “all things in common,” these ambitious builders simply wandered off in various directions. Surely they must have wondered about their vocation and their future—for *everyone* knows that future and security comes through stability in location, a common culture, and reliance upon one’s own accomplishments. Everyone but the Lord of the universe!

We can only speculate, but they must have thought this was the end of their story. After 11 chapters of trying to reach up and become like God, this final seemingly foolproof plan now lay shattered across the Mesopotamian plains. However, the story was only beginning—for God countered their futile attempts to reach up to him by reaching down to them!

THE CALL OF ABRAHAM—A WONDERFUL STORY?

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 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. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the LORD had told him ... (Gen 12:1-4a)

We love this story! Or should I say, we love the Sunday school version of this story. I still have indelibly etched in my mind a smiling Abraham and Sarah bouncing along Mesopotamia 101 in their Birkenstocks with little donkeys loaded to the sky with Samsonite. However, the text gives us none of that. Its mention of Abraham is sparse to say the least—“and Abraham went.”

We read Abraham’s faith back into this opening scene and so highlight the tremendous faith he must have had to obey God’s call. We retroject later narratives of Abraham and so speak of Abraham’s unswerving allegiance to God. *This passage* talks none of this, for it apparently has another focus—another main character in mind—God! If we read the text closely we realize that all the verbs have God as their subject. Our text is first and foremost about what God is doing.

Yet we simply can’t resist; we want to know: *why* did God choose Abraham? Amazingly, we are given no credentials, no qualifications for Abraham. God doesn’t even ask him to submit a resume. Abraham has done nothing, good or bad, to receive this call. Even more remarkably, in response to God’s call, Abraham says not a word.

Then we encounter another surprise—this favorite text is not about command and obedience; it is about promise and embrace. Abraham *primarily* is not called to obey a command; he is called to embrace a *promise*! This beloved passage then is not about commands, rules, regulations, and obedience. Simply put—God makes promises and calls his creation to embrace those promises with open arms!

And God’s promises are grand—they span the landscape—land, descendants too numerous to count, fame, and blessing. Those very things the Babel builders tried so hard to manufacture on their own God now promises to this lone Semite in Mesopotamia.

And yet, it is not all lightness and roses, for the promises carry “issues.” To receive this “promised land,” Abraham will have to depart from his current land. Perhaps more importantly, soon he will discover the land to which he is moving is already occupied by the Canaanites. And the one the promising God has designated a “father of multitudes” is currently the husband of a barren wife.

And then there is “one more thing.” Though promises at first blush seem far preferable to commands, upon further inspection we realize that promises often are far more complicated to embrace than keeping commands. In reality, we’ve simply come full circle. Genesis first lets us know this pivotal change in world history is more about God than about Abraham by linking all the verbs to God; now, as we encounter this text of promise and embrace, we realize it is about the *promise-maker*.

Isn't that the trouble with promises? No matter how attractive and appealing, a promise's worth depends ultimately upon the reliability, credibility, and *trustworthiness* of the one making the promise. To obey a command places the spotlight squarely upon the one keeping the command; to embrace a promise keeps the spotlight off us and back upon God.

It is precisely at this point the challenge arises, for we must *daily* engage the promise. Since situations may change daily, we must decide anew each day whether the promise-maker is trustworthy—and whether he has the power to fulfill his promises in these new circumstances. And let us not be naïve, the challenges are sometimes daunting.

No sooner does Abraham enter this land of promise than famine breaks out. The future father of a multitude must decide whether this promising God has sufficient power to protect him outside the borders of the land of promise. Though Abraham may doubt the trustworthiness of his promising God, this God goes the second mile—he blesses Abraham in spite of himself.

Blessing surrounds Abraham, for this is more about God than about Abraham. Like a faithful covenant partner, God repeatedly reaffirms his promises to Abraham; with each move, Abraham embraces again this

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promise-maker and builds another altar to his faithful God. Although Abraham's allegiance to God may not always be perfect (some days he distances himself from the promise, manifesting fear, while other days he fully embraces the promise, demonstrating faith) God's absolute fidelity to his promises never wavers! God simply and compellingly keeps calling his child Abraham to embrace the promise,

even in the face of ambiguity, confusion, and sometimes even seemingly contradictory evidence.

It is no wonder this is a story we love to *tell*, for it is a story about God bringing fertility in the midst of barrenness, manifesting protection in the face of danger, showering blessings in the midst of threat, and even victory in the place of potential defeat! *It is a story we love to tell; it is not necessarily a story we love to live!*

And yet, it is Scripture—not only Scripture, but a portion of Scripture that repeatedly resurfaces! Ah—there's the rub.

Fortunately, we have a time-honored and tested method of dealing with passages such as these—passages that are wonderful to tell but dangerously intimidating to live out. We tame such stories by keeping them in *past tense*! We piously state that this passage is about Abraham—and God's call to him to embrace this promise. We can hardly resist the temptation to move quickly through this text to the “and Abraham went” (and say quietly under our breath)—and so I don't have to!

However, this text refuses to be tamed in such a manner, for not only does it keep resurfacing in Scripture, it resurfaces prominently in the messages of our Savior Jesus and his preeminent missionary Paul. This text is gospel pure and simple, and we dare not neglect the gospel.

THE CALL OF ABRAHAM AND THE CLASH OF CULTURE

The narratives of the Tower of Babel and the call of Abraham stand in bold relief to each other, the one articulating dramatically the Mesopotamian dream, the other portraying vividly faith in God. When the dust settles, this text confronts us with a clash of cultures—in a world powerfully and relentlessly pursuing the Mesopotamian dream, God counters that dream with a call to Abraham to embrace in faith a promise.

In a world looking for its calling, a world wandering anxiously and aimlessly about, and a world desperately seeking security and fame, God calls this lone Semite, calls him to pilgrimage with a purpose, and promises to make his name great and shower him with abundant blessings.

If we listen closely to this text, we realize it is finally about us, for like Abraham, we must choose daily between the American dream and the Christian faith. As in the ancient world of Abraham, both spheres make similar promises—both the American dream and the Christian faith talk of calling; both the American dream and the Christian faith employ the metaphor of pilgrimage; and both the American dream and the Christian faith promise blessings.

So, what do we want to be? The American dream says we can be anything we want to be and speaks of calling in its own way. However, the American dream focuses its attention upon us—the ones called. We live in a world where daily we are chosen ... or not. We celebrate our accomplishments and achievements, for those are at the heart of our identity. We are chosen—or not—based on our athletic abilities, our intellectual prowess, our charm and good looks, our skin color ... the list continues ad infinitum!

We understand this world, and so long to know what “qualified” Abraham for this call from God? In contrast, Genesis 12 maintains its focus consistently upon God, the one calling. Abraham’s life story will have God at its center, or it will have no center. Though we desperately want Abraham to merit God’s call, so that we might delude ourselves into thinking we deserve God’s calling of us, Scripture consistently reminds us that “not many of us were wise, mighty, or of noble birth!” The theme of God’s calling his creatures into relationship remains constant—God consistently selects the least-likely candidates (the Hannahs, Davids, Elizabeth and Zechariahs, and Marys) to topple human pride and self-absorption.

Genesis 12 resoundingly affirms that the Creator of the universe, the one who first called the world into being, is now calling Abraham to fashion an alternative community to a creation gone haywire. However, embracing that call will first involve abandonment, renunciation, and relinquishment of the present conditions. Such talk is scandalous to our self-indulgent culture!

To a world and society that trafficks in self-indulgence and instant gratification, God calls us, like Abraham, to embrace a promise, even during those moments when the gulf seems greatest between what is and what is promised. To a society not only given to, but celebrating self-absorption, God calls us to embrace his future with such a passion that even the present can be relinquished for the future. God calls us, like Abraham, to trust with all our heart, our soul, and our might, the Promise-Maker!

Let us make no mistake—embracing the marvelous promises of God is neither easy nor once for all—for there are always “Canaanites in the land” and seemingly more attractive ways to live. Yet like Abraham, God calls us to live as a “minority report” among the nations. As we stay with this powerful text, we realize that the faith God calls Abraham to is nothing more, and nothing less, than the faith that Jesus calls his followers to embrace.

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As God called Abraham, Jesus calls us to a faith that is not mere intellectual assent to a set of propositions or an inner disposition of the heart but to a faith that manifests itself first and foremost in our *active* engagement—a radical call to “leave father and mother, sister and brother” for the sake of the kingdom! As it was for Abraham, the call to us is captured in the metaphor of *pilgrimage*.

Ah, pilgrimage, now there’s a theme we Americans can get our arms around. Whereas the American obsession with calling and being chosen may make some of us nervous, pilgrimage is a theme we Americans can all celebrate. It is at the heart of our identity. Each Thanksgiving we gather around a table overloaded with food to celebrate pilgrimage. Thousands of us even make a pilgrimage to the original site of the first pilgrims—Plymouth Rock. We love to recount the story, for it is a story of self-determination and self-will, a story of courage and conviction, a story of boldly moving from a life of limitation and hardship to a life of freedom and limitless possibilities.

And if we are not careful, we superimpose these truly American themes of pilgrimage upon the biblical theme of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage becomes a temporary condition, an action we take to move from a less-desirable location to a more-desirable location. Pilgrimage is what we do when our current “settled state” is less than we would like it to be. In those situations, we embark upon a pilgrimage to better our settled state.

In contrast, the biblical writers remind us that pilgrimage is neither temporary nor to be confused with “upward mobility.” Unlike us, the early Christians were painfully aware of their complete inability to influence officially or determine their social status. Daily, they confronted the reality that they lived in an (at best) indifferent society and (at worst) hostile empire. They were truly resident aliens in their world. They knew only too well they had no power to change the current sociopolitical environment; they only had the power to bestow God’s blessings on the world in which they lived. They affirmed that pilgrimage was not a temporary lot in life: it was a worldview.

It is not without significance that the earliest Christians were first called members of “the Way.” The rest of the world might be settled and fixed; they were pilgrims with a purpose. The same God who had called Abraham to “go to a land that I will show you” had called them in Jesus Christ to “take up their cross and follow him.” Just as God had responded to those Babel builders with a pilgrim (Abraham), so the God of Jesus the Christ, the one with “nowhere to lay his head,” had called them forth to build, not towers, but communities of faith!

Like Abraham, they moved through the world dispensing the grace of the Lord they had themselves experienced in Jesus Christ. Unlike the unsuccessful Babel builders, who ultimately wandered aimlessly throughout the earth, these followers of the Way were pilgrims with a purpose. Children of Abraham, they moved purposefully throughout the Mediterranean world dispensing the blessings of God.

Blessing: Genesis talks a lot about blessing. We talk of blessing, blessing as a polite response to a sneeze, a pious way to say goodbye, or perhaps most importantly, a religious way to justify “success.” As Americans, we prefer success language to the language of blessing for success places the spotlight upon us (the called), while blessing highlights the one dispensing the blessing (the caller). Just as we prefer talking of our credentials for being the ones called, so we love to take credit for our success. In contrast, Genesis 12 talks of blessing and refuses to remove the spotlight from God.

But the issue goes beyond semantics; it is not simply a matter of the language we choose. The Christian sector of our society has become fascinated—no, obsessed—with blessing. Christian bookcracks overflow with books crassly affirming that God loves to bless us and shower upon us his infinite treasures. However, Genesis 12 affirms that blessings are for sharing! Genesis 12 declares that God blesses us so that we might be a blessing to others!

Among children of God who desperately want to see themselves as *receptacles* of God’s blessings, Genesis 12 powerfully portrays Abraham as a *conduit* of God’s blessings. God calls him to bestow divine blessings upon others as he moves throughout the land.

Such a message calls the church to radically question current practices. Genesis 12 is no Pollyanna view of reality: Canaanites are in the land, and their world is extremely alluring. However, God did not call Abraham to “hunker down” and isolate himself from others, lest he jeopardize the blessing!

Rather, God repeatedly declares to Abraham that his power to bless and protect can overwhelm even the most threatening of circumstances. Genesis 12, gospel, presents us with God’s response to a world shattered and fragile—God sends forth his pilgrims to bless!

THE AMERICAN DREAM OR THE CHRISTIAN FAITH: WHICH WILL WE CHOOSE?

The stakes are incredibly high. The text before us won’t allow us to remain in the past. It refuses to be read simply as a text about a single Semite who lived long ago. If we listen closely, this is also a text about us. Just as God called Abraham millennia ago to embrace his promise, so he calls us to embrace his promises.

This ancient text, marvelous to tell, difficult to live, calls us to make a decision. It calls us to make a decision—to choose between two ways of living. Just as Abraham lived embedded in a culture captured by the Mesopotamian dream, so we live fully embedded in a culture given over to the American dream. The call to Abraham forces us to choose between two worlds—the world of the American dream, articulated eloquently in the Tower of Babel episode of Genesis 11, or the world of Christian faith, demonstrated powerfully in the call to Abraham in Genesis 12.

And the choice is difficult, for both calls use similar language. Both talk of call, pilgrimage, and blessing. Oh, the American dream may modify “call” language a bit and prefer the term “chosen,” and modify the language of “blessing” to “success,” but the calls and claims rival each other powerfully. For at their heart, the issue concerns the subject at the center of the spotlight.

The American dream repeatedly calls us to pull the spotlight toward ourselves, highlighting our credentials, accomplishments, and abilities as the chosen ones. The American dream tells us we can be “anything we want to be,” and beckons us to make that upward pilgrimage toward a more satisfying and fulfilling life. The American dream calls us to celebrate our success.

In contrast, the Christian faith refuses to allow the spotlight to move away from God. It calls us to embrace pilgrimage, not as a strategy for bettering our own lot in life but as a lifestyle for dispensing the blessings of the gracious Lord of the universe. It refuses to let us take credit for the marvelous blessings God has bestowed upon us—or to shamelessly hoard them.

If we hear this text clearly, it becomes “scandalous,” for it affirms that we have no possibility of life without a positive attitude toward this ancient Semite! Our response to Abraham carries monumental implications, for it carries within it a choice for or against Jesus Christ.

To embrace God’s call to Abraham is to embrace the one who said, “Not my will, but thine, be done.” To embark upon the pilgrimage with Abraham is to join our lives with the one who had “nowhere to lay his head.” To embrace God’s call to Abraham is to *daily* “take up our cross and follow him.” To embrace God’s call to Abraham is to live our lives as ones who have come “not to be served, but to serve.”

To embrace God’s call to Abraham is to affirm that our story begins, not with us, but with a promising word from God. To embrace God’s call to Abraham powerfully proclaims that in a world of barrenness and anxious wandering, we have encountered and embraced the all-powerful Lord of the universe who showers his grace upon us and empowers us to become pilgrims with a purpose! To embrace God’s call to Abraham is simply to affirm with Paul that the God we worship, this God of Abraham, is a God who “gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist” (Rom 4:17).

The promises are God’s, the choice to embrace or distance is ours!

The text before us is challenging, demanding, nay scandalous, for it declares that our story of faith is inseparably tied to Abraham’s life of faith. In Abraham, we find our paradigm for pilgrimage, for faith, and for right relationship with God. In Abraham, we encounter one who prepares us for the ultimate realization of God’s promises in Jesus the Christ.

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 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. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the LORD had told him...

RICK R. MARRS

Dr. Marrs teaches Old Testament and serves as associate dean of Seaver College at Pepperdine University, Malibu, California. He is also a member of the *Leaven* editorial board.