

THE CALL OF ABRAM

Genesis 11:27-32; 12:1-10

Noah's descendants, like the descendants of Adam and Eve, turned away from the Lord and wanted to go their own way, until finally they became so selfish that they could not live peaceably together and had to be scattered over the face of the earth. There is a good moral lesson for small children here because they know that when even one child in a group is selfish, there is always quarreling and trouble.

Doctrinal Points

In the Bible the first eleven chapters were taken from the Ancient Word and are not literal history. Literal history begins with chapter 12.

Notes for Parents

With the story of Abram we enter historic times. Abram and his family were real people who actually did the things recorded in the Bible. But the Lord chose them and so directed their lives that the record, just like the great symbol stories in the first few chapters, could contain within it deep spiritual lessons for all men in all times.

The second great church, pictured by Noah and his descendants, declined just as the first had through the increasing selfishness and pride of its members. The Old Testament story is a long series of beginnings, declines, and new beginnings. Isn't this true also of the history of the world and of the lives of individuals? Whenever a nation becomes so corrupt that there is no longer anything in it to which the Lord can appeal, the Lord steps in and draws out of it whatever individuals He can find who are still willing to obey Him, and forms of them a new beginning. And when an individual becomes corrupt and forsakes all that he has been taught of the

right way of life, he is lost unless the Lord can find within him something to which He can appeal as the basis for a new upward trend.

Abram and his family were called to leave their native place and go to the land of Canaan. Life is a journey, and all who wish to obey the Lord are called to make this journey of Abram. We all recognize the land of Canaan—the Holy Land—as a symbol of heaven or a heavenly character. The land of our nativity is our selfish natural state. The journey is long, but the Lord promises us as He promised Abram that if we will take the way He points out to us, He will be with us and bless us and protect us and bring us at last into possession of our heavenly home.

Everyone—even among those who mean to obey the Lord—does not go all the way. Abram’s old father and his brother Nahor and his family stopped at Haran, a place to the northeast of Canaan. They prospered there and kept their contact with Abram and his descendants. In fact, Abram’s son Isaac and grandson Jacob married wives from Haran. All people who believe in God and try to be good are the Lord’s “sheep,” cared for by Him; but all do not attain the same spiritual stature.

We should not be satisfied with doing less than our best in the Lord’s service. We should want to go all the way, as Abram did. And this will bring us to a state of wanting to know more and more about the Lord and what He wants us to do—as Abram experienced a famine and went down to Egypt, the great storehouse of the ancient world, and brought back to the Holy Land the riches he acquired there. The happiness which the Lord can give us is necessarily measured by the degree to which we are willing to apply ourselves to learning the truth which He has revealed to us in His Word and the effort we make to live according to it.



Primary

This is the children’s introduction to Abraham (who was first called Abram), someone they will hear a great deal about. Be sure they learn his name. It is

also their introduction to the Holy Land. They will also be interested in hearing about Abram's long journey and about the members of the family who started with him and those who did not go all the way. The group should remember *Abraham*, *Sarah*, and *Lot*, and should be told about the place called *Haran* or the *city of Nahor*. They should also learn the names of the two places in the Holy Land where Abram first stopped: *Shechem* and *Bethel*. Tell them about the building of the altars and what an altar stands for, and call their attention to the altar in the church and to the fact that a copy of the Word is kept on it. Impress upon them Abraham's obedience to the Lord and his gratitude to the Lord, as expressed in the building of the altars.

When the early people became so wicked that they had to be destroyed, who was saved?

How was he saved from the flood?

What can you tell about the ark?

Who were saved with Noah?

What else was saved in the ark?

After the flood was over, Noah and his family and all the animals came out of the ark to begin a new life on earth.

The first thing Noah did was to build an altar and worship the Lord. An altar is a sign of worship. In Noah's time most of the altars were built of large stones piled one on top of another. We have altars in our churches, too, but most of them are made of wood. Your Sunday School teacher will show you the one in your church. We always keep the Bible on our altars. That is because the Bible is the Word of God in which the Lord speaks to us and tells us what to do.

The Lord promised Noah that He would never again destroy mankind, and Noah promised always to obey the Lord. A two-way promise of this kind is called a "covenant." And the Lord gave Noah a beautiful sign of this covenant. Do you know what this sign was? It was the rainbow.

But Noah's descendants did not always keep the promise Noah had made to the Lord. They began to think that they could be wise without worshipping the Lord, and finally they became so conceited and selfish that they could not even get along with each other.

Do you remember the story of the Tower of Babel?

This time, instead of destroying the people, the Lord scattered them over the face of the earth.

But again He found one family who were still willing to obey Him.

This family lived in Ur in the country of Chaldea, far to the east of Canaan.

The father of this family was Terah, and he had three sons, Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

The Lord told them to leave their home and go to the land of Canaan.

It was a long, hard journey, and they did not all go all the way.

They stopped at a place northwest of Canaan and Nahor decided to stay there. He named the place for his brother Haran, who had died before they left Ur, but it is also the city of Nahor. The old father Terah died there.

Who went on to the land of Canaan? Lot was Haran's son.

What did the Lord promise Abram?

Where did they stop first in the land of Canaan?

What was their second stop?

What did Abram build in each place?

Why did they go down into Egypt?



Junior

The details of the story, with names and places, should be mastered. The Juniors will be interested in knowing that an *h*, one of the letters from the name *Jehovah*, was later put into Abram's name to indicate his closer relation to the Lord after he settled in the Holy Land. On account of later lessons special emphasis should be put on the settling of Nahor and his family in Haran, also called the city of Nahor. Be sure to have the children locate all the places on the map, and point out the great desert which caused them to go so far north instead of straight across. The meaning of the Holy Land, of Abram's call to go there, of the altars, and of going down into Egypt may also be touched on.

What finally happened to most of the people of the Most Ancient Church?

Who were saved?

How were they saved?

What did Noah take into the ark besides his family?

How long did the rain last?

After the flood the descendants of Noah repopled the earth. At first they were good, but after a while they began again to want their own way and to think that their own ideas were better than the truth they received from the Lord. The story of the Tower of

Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) is a picture of how they tried to set themselves up, and had to be scattered to prevent them from destroying each other.

The rest of the eleventh chapter of Genesis is a genealogy. This means that it is a list of the sons and grandsons and great grandsons and so on of someone. In this case the someone is Shem.

Who was Shem?

Who were his brothers?

The men in these old lists seem to live much longer than men do now, but that is because the names are not the names of real people but of whole groups of people, just as we might perhaps call the United States *Uncle Sam* and say, “Uncle Sam has lived over two hundred years.” The first real person mentioned in the Bible was *Eber*, better written *Heber*, from whom the Jews were called *Hebrews*.

Our lesson today starts with a man named *Terah*.

Where did he live?

How many sons did he have?

We need to learn their names because we shall hear of all of them again.

Which one of the sons died in Ur?

What son did he leave?

What did the Lord tell Terah to do?

Trace on a map the route of the journey of the family from Ur. It was a long, slow journey. They did not have automobiles and airplanes in those days. They traveled on foot or on donkeys, and they took all their cattle and sheep with them. The cattle and sheep had to stop to graze every day. At night the people put up tents for themselves, and set a watch over the flocks and herds.

Where did Terah stop?

We learn afterward that Nahor and his family stopped there and decided to go no further. They named the city *Haran* after the brother who had died before they left Ur, but it is also often called the *city of Nahor*. Try to remember this city because we shall have

other stories in which it is important.

Why did Abram go further?

What did the Lord promise him?

Who went with him?

Into what land did they come?

The land of Canaan is also called the *Holy Land*; later it was called *Palestine* and today it is called *Israel*.

Where in the Holy Land did Abram first stop?

Where did he stop next?

We must remember the names of these places because we shall have stories about them later.

What did Abram build both times he stopped?

Why could not Abram settle in the Holy Land when he first got there?

What is a *famine*?

Where did Abram go because of the famine?

We usually call Abram *Abraham*. The Lord Himself later changed the name by putting in the *h*, which is one of the letters in *Jehovah*, the Lord's own name. And He changed Sarai's name to *Sarah*. This means that after they returned from Egypt and made their permanent home in the Holy Land, they came into a closer relation with the Lord than they had had before.

Intermediate

Set the young people's minds working on the correspondence of a journey to life. After you have pointed it out and illustrated it a little, they will be interested in thinking of other words and phrases in common use which are based on this correspondence, such as *progressive* and *backward* nations, the *road to success*, *following in the steps* of someone, *taking the wrong road* to happiness, *standing still*, the *highroad to fortune*, and the *march of time*. If they begin to think in these terms now, it will help their "feeling" for the correspondence of the whole Bible story.

Noah and his descendants picture a second great church, the Ancient Church, which the Lord had established on the earth. The Ancient Word—the Bible before our Bible—was written during the time of this church, and the delight of the people was the study of correspondences. But after a while man began again to turn from

the Lord to self. People forgot the symbolic meaning of the images they had set up in connection with their worship, and they became idolaters. The breaking up of this second church is described in the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9.

After the story of the Tower of Babel, chapter 11 tells us the names of the descendants of Shem, the first son of Noah. These people came to be called the Semites, and they lived in what is now called Asia Minor. The names in chapter 11:10-13, like all the names in the earlier Bible story, are not the names of individuals but of whole generations. In verse 14, however, we come to the period of recorded history. Swedenborg tells us that the first real person mentioned in the Bible story is *Eber*. His name would be more correctly written *Heber*, and it is from him that the Jews were called Hebrews.

So the people in our story for today are real people. But the story has an inner meaning just the same, and it also deals with the formation of a third church, the Jewish Church.

Look at a map and find Ur of the Chaldees. You see that the great desert of Arabia lies between Ur and the land of Canaan. So when the Lord told Abram to leave Ur and go to the land of Canaan, he had to travel a long way around the desert. Follow his route north along the river—the Euphrates—and find Haran. Haran was named for Lot's father, who had died before the family left Ur. Haran also came to be called the city of Nahor, because Nahor, Abram's other brother, settled there with his family instead of going all the way to the Holy Land. We shall hear of Haran very soon again. Terah, Abram's father, died in Haran, and only Abram and his nephew Lot and their families and servants went on.

In addition to the place called *Haran* we should try to remember the two places in the Holy Land where Abram first stopped and built altars—*Shechem* (Sichem) and *Bethel*. All the names of people and places in the Bible story are very important because of their spiritual meaning. Still another appears at the close of our lesson—*Egypt*. Egypt, where the Nile River kept the land always fertile, was the storehouse of the ancient world, to which people

of other lands knew they could go for food in times of famine. We shall learn its meaning presently. Again and again in the Bible it is said that people went down into Egypt.

The story of the call of Abram in its inner meaning tells us of a call that comes to every one of us from the Lord: the call to leave selfish ways which “come natural” to us, and to travel toward the heavenly state of life which the Lord wants us to attain. The land of Canaan, the Holy Land, is the Bible picture of this heavenly state. It is in relation to this heavenward journey that every person and place has its spiritual meaning. Egypt pictures the great storehouse of facts which we need to know. You can easily guess what the famine pictures, but look up Amos 8:11. Again and again in our lives we come to situations in which we feel the lack of sufficient knowledge. Then we have to go down into Egypt. This is true of our spiritual progress also. We need often to “read and meditate upon the Word of God”—one of Swedenborg’s *Rules of Life*—to increase our knowledge of what the Lord wants us to be and to do. This is a spiritual going down into Egypt. Coming back to the Holy Land is putting our new knowledge to use in the Lord’s service.

Basic Correspondences

Ur of the Chaldees = our natural selfish state

the land of Canaan = a heavenly state

Haran = a good natural state

Egypt = a state of acquiring knowledge



Senior

The two points to be most carefully developed for the Seniors are the call to turn our backs on our natural selfish desires and thoughts, and our recurring need of new knowledge from the Word as we go through life, which is pictured in the Bible story by the frequent going down into Egypt. This ties in with our earlier lesson on the nature of the spiritual church. The young people know that in order to progress in any worldly occupation they need con-

stantly to learn new things about it. They should be able to recognize that this must be equally true of spiritual progress.

The story of Noah is the story of the rise and decline of a second great church—the Ancient Church—and its final dispersion is described in the story of the Tower of Babel. Then we have a long genealogy. You will understand that this tells of the passing of many generations and covers probably many centuries. But now we are coming down in the Bible story to historic times. Swedenborg tells us that the first real person whose name appears in the Bible is *Eber* (Genesis 11:14), or *Heber*, as it should be written, from whom the Jews were called *Hebrews*. So the story of the third church, the Jewish Church, is for the most part true in the letter as well as having an inner meaning. Although the inner meaning is the truth which the Lord wishes us to learn, we must first fix in our minds the literal story, for it is only through the letter that the inner meaning can be reached. The names and incidents in these early chapters are mentioned again and again as we proceed in our reading.

The people of the earth had now gone far from the Lord, and the Jewish Church, instead of being either spiritual or celestial, was to be wholly natural, a mere representative of a church, for there can be no true church without a spiritual interior. Yet the Lord could still be present in the world through the correspondence of the rituals which the Jews were commanded to observe (Hebrews 8:5).

Again a remnant of the old church was called to begin the new. Abram and his family were this remnant. Abram was called to leave his home and go to the Holy Land, which was promised him for himself and his descendants as a possession forever. Naturally the Jews take this promise literally and so do many Christians. The history of this land since the Second World War has been deeply influenced by this belief. But it is the spiritual descendants of Abram—those who obey the Lord, as Abram did—to whom the promise is really made, and the land promised is not the earthly Canaan but what it represents—a heavenly state of lasting peace

and happiness. Abram obeyed the Lord's call, and his obedience began a new history.

There is a beautiful lesson for us as individuals in the inner meaning of this story. Each one of us is called by the Lord to leave our own country—our natural selfish state—and journey to the Holy Land of heavenly living. It is a long, slow journey, with many stops on the way. Everyone who begins this journey does not attain the same state. Abram's father Terah died in Haran before they actually reached the Holy Land, and Abram's brother Nahor and his family settled in Haran. Haran represents a state of natural goodness, a state in which many people stop, people who want to obey the Lord and to be good, but are content with obedience of an external type and are not interested in learning and understanding the deeper spiritual lessons the Lord has to give us.

Abram and Lot and their families went on and reached Canaan, journeying steadily southward. As the east represents a state near to the Lord in heart, so the south pictures a state of spiritual intelligence, a progression into clearer light. Wherever he stopped Abram built an altar to the Lord. So we ought to do. We should recognize the Lord's providence in every attainment of our lives and thank him at each step for bringing us to another stage of our journey.

But before Abram could settle in the land permanently, a famine came upon him. The famine pictures a sense of need for more knowledge, which always comes periodically if we are really making progress (Amos 8:11). When we reach a point at which we think we know enough about the Lord and what he wants of us, we may be very sure we have stopped advancing spiritually. Throughout the Word Egypt pictures the store of natural knowledges—in its best sense knowledge of the letter of the Word. Abram went down into Egypt. Later Jacob, Joseph, and finally the Lord Himself went down into Egypt. All our learning periods are sojourns in Egypt.

Abram, as founder of the Jewish Church, pictures our first child-

like response to the Lord's call to lead a good life. We are to leave our country (the low state of spiritual life into which we are born), our kindred (our general selfish affections and thoughts), and our father's house (our own particular inherited weaknesses and evils), and go to the land which the Lord will show us—a heavenly state of life which will open to us gradually if we accept the Lord's guidance (Matthew 19:29). When we see that the purpose of life is to do the Lord's will and not our own, we are hearing the Lord's call, and our obedience to this call is the beginning of our heavenward journey.

Adult

The change to the period of actual history should be pointed out and explained. Cover the general points of the lesson briefly and then ask for questions and develop further the indicated subjects.

Up to this point our lessons have been on the portion of the Word Swedenborg says was copied by Moses from the Ancient Word, and we have not been dealing with historical fact in the letter.* *Arcana Coelestia* nn. 1140 and 1343 state that the first person mentioned in the Word who is a historical personage as well as a representative figure is Eber (Genesis 11:14), from whom the Hebrews took their name. AC 1343 says that Eber constituted a Second Ancient Church, which came to an end in idolatrous worship in Terah, the father of Abram, and that Abram signifies a Third Ancient Church (AC 1360), from or in which the Lord instituted the Jewish Church. The Second Ancient Church, like the First, recognized spiritual things and knew that its forms of worship had their value from their correspondence. It was in this church that sacrifices were instituted. But as the people degenerated, the knowledge of the spiritual meaning of the various acts and symbols of worship was lost until they regarded their images and sacrifices as holy in themselves, and became idolaters, knowing

*See AC 1401, but also see SS 103.

nothing of love for the Lord and the neighbor or of heaven and eternal life. So the Lord and the angels could no longer be present with men in their interiors—their hearts and minds—because they no longer had any internal thought, and because all real worship is internal, there could no longer be a real church on earth. Still the Lord had to keep His contact with men in order to keep them alive and to save those whose intentions were good. So He instituted the Jewish Church, which was not a real church at all but merely the representative of a church. One of the Epistles says of the Jewish priests who “offer gifts according to the law” that they “serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things” (Hebrews 8:5). The Hebrew nation was chosen by the Lord for this purpose not because they were a particularly religious people, as is commonly thought, but because they were a wholly external people, and could be led through fear of punishment and hope of reward, without interfering with their freedom, to carry on worship of Jehovah according to the particular forms which would correspondentially represent true worship, and so by the correspondence of these forms could keep the connection between heaven and earth. Their history could be so providentially directed by the Lord that, recorded in words, it would correspondentially express heavenly things and the divine life itself.

It is the history of this church which we are beginning now. Abram was a man who lived on the earth and did things of which we read in the letter of the Word; but if he had been no more than that, the story of his life would be of no more value to us than the history of any other man. He is also a representative figure—representative of the Lord and of the celestial man—and everything that is recorded of him in the Word has a meaning with reference to the Lord’s life and to our own lives. And we should remember that it is what the Lord chose to have recorded in the Word which has this meaning. The findings of archaeology with regard to conditions in Abram’s time may be interesting to us as natural learning, but they add nothing to our understanding of the Word.

We have learned that the stories of the Garden of Eden treated

of the rise and decline of the church in a celestial type of person, and that the stories of Noah treat of the rise and decline of the church in the spiritual type of person. Now we come to the development of a church among natural men. We are born natural men and women, and it takes a long time for us to develop on this natural plane; so the story is given us in detail, and every detail has a deep importance for us individually. The dealings of the Lord with the Jews throughout their history as it is recorded in the Scriptures picture His dealings with us in our progress through life. This is what makes the Bible the Book of Life for us.

Abram was called to make a journey. The symbol of a journey as the correspondent of progress through life is so woven into our common thought and speech that everyone should be able to recognize it. Indeed the journey of the children of Israel through the wilderness has always been recognized as a picture of the progress of the soul. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is a classic example of the use of this symbol. The very word *progress* embodies the same symbolism. We cannot talk at all without employing correspondences. In life we pass from state to state, from low to high or from high to low. Sometimes we go backward; sometimes we stand still. We reach lofty states of vision, like mountain tops, from which we can look back upon the whole of our life and see it in its true proportions, and forward to the new states we are approaching. We recognize this symbolism as a fact. But with Swedenborg's help—or rather, with the help of the Lord by means of Swedenborg—we are enabled to go further: we can understand the meaning of each detail in this Bible journey of Abram and apply it to our own experience. Abram was called to leave Ur of the Chaldees, the land of his birth, and go to the land of Canaan. The land of our birth is our natural inheritance of evil and falsity; the land of Canaan is a heavenly state. The Lord calls each one of us to turn our backs upon our natural selfish impulses and thoughts and, in obedience to His commands and under His guidance to travel toward a state of heavenly feeling and thought—thus toward heaven itself. We do not get there all at once. We sometimes tarry a long

time in halfway states, as Abram tarried at Haran. Some of us, without actually going backward, stop halfway, as Nahor and his family did. If we go on with Abram and reach our goal, we do not remain in the first heavenly state we taste, which is pictured by Abram's stop at Shechem in the valley, but we go on to the higher country of Bethel. Each new heavenly state fills us with gratitude to the Lord, which is pictured by Abram's building altars wherever he stopped.

Then we come inevitably to a time when we feel a hunger for more truth. There was a famine in the land. "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11). And we know that: "Blessed are they that do hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled." Spiritual hunger and thirst are meant by famine. Abram went down into Egypt. The land of Egypt is the Bible symbol of a state of learning on the natural plane—"the memory knowledge of knowledges," as it is called in AC 1461. There was no rain from heaven in Egypt, but its land seldom failed to yield crops because it was made fertile by the annual overflow of the Nile and watered from it by irrigation. In the same way, our memory knowledge comes to us not from within but from without, and its fruit is stored up constantly waiting to be needed. Whenever there was a famine in the ancient world, its people knew that in Egypt they could buy grain. So Abram went down into Egypt; later Joseph went down, and was followed by all the children of Israel; and finally the Lord Himself as a babe was taken into Egypt. We should have no difficulty in seeing what these journeys into Egypt mean in our spiritual life. They mean procuring knowledge from the letter of the Word where the Lord has stored it up for us. Whenever there is a famine in our spiritual life, what we need is to go to the Word and read it and learn new truths from its letter, into which the spirit of the Lord may flow, enlightening us and giving us new spiritual power. But we are never to stay permanently in this mere learning state. We are to take our new riches back to the Holy

Land as Abram did and use them in the Lord's service in our daily life.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 1461: "And Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn. That this signifies instruction in knowledges from the Word, is evident from the signification of 'Egypt,' and from the signification of 'sojourning.' That 'Egypt' signifies the memory-knowledge of knowledges, and that 'to sojourn' signifies to be instructed, will be seen presently. . . . The external man is corporeal and sensuous; nor does it receive anything celestial and spiritual unless knowledges are implanted in it, as in ground; for in these celestial things can have their recipient vessels. But the knowledges must be from the Word. Knowledges from the Word are such that they are open from the Lord Himself; for the Word itself is from the Lord through heaven, and the Lord's life is in all things of the Word, both in general and in particular, although it does not so appear in the external form."

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- I. Are the first eleven chapters of the Bible historical fact? *no*
- J. Who was the first real person mentioned in the Bible? *Eber*
- I. Who was chosen by the Lord to begin the establishment of a new church on earth? *Abram*
- J. Who was Abram's father? Who were his brothers? *Terah; Haran, Nahor*
- J. Who was his wife? *Sarai*
- P. Where did they live? *Ur, Chaldea*
- P. Where did the Lord tell them to go? *Canaan*
- J. Where did they stop first? *Haran (city of Nahor)*
- P. Who went on from Haran? Who was Lot? *Lot, Abram's nephew*
- J. What did the Lord promise Abram? *to be father of nation*
- J. Where did he stop first in the land of Canaan? *Shechem (Sichem)*
- J. What was his second stop? *near Bethel*
- P. What did he build in both places? *altar*
- J. Where did he then go, and why? *Egypt, famine*
- I. What does the land of Canaan represent? *heavenly way of life*
- I. What does Abram's journey represent? *leave inherited selfish tendencies...*
- S. What does going into Egypt represent? *gaining needed truth from the Word*
- S. What does this teach us about our own lives? *we will repeatedly need to learn more truth*