



Leaves From the Tree

Studies from God's Word

In 2005, Pastor Tim Bourgeois began a daily bible reading to encourage Tree of Life Christian Church and the larger body of Christ to read the entire Bible cover to cover.

The following series of articles are transcripts of Pastor Tim's original emails.

Please use these articles for meditation, personal devotion, Bible study, or your own daily Bible reading.



GENESIS 11 - 16

Genesis 11

11:4 - "They said, "Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."

The first thing to recognize is that the story of the Tower of Babel is history, not ancient legend. This event actually happened as described here. It provides for us a practical description of how the population that grew from Noah's family after the flood came to split and scatter throughout the world, and it gives us the spiritual explanation behind the event. The background of what developed is the growth soon after the flood of human rebellion fueled by pride and fear. The Lord had declared His purpose for humanity to Noah and his sons when they left the ark following the flood. His descendants were to spread out and repopulate the world. "And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." (Genesis 9:1) Now, soon after, the growing population has already disregarded the command of the Lord and is sinfully unified in their desire to do just the opposite. Their concern was to not be scattered abroad over the face of the earth. They sought security in their own unity and proximity to each other, rather than in their obedience to the Lord. There is a powerful lesson here for every generation of history to follow. True security is only found in obeying the Lord. Any society that rejects the Lord and His commandments and attempts to establish its own security is doomed to fall.

Their other motivation besides security was fame. They wanted to make a name for themselves. This principle of civic pride or national pride has been the driving force behind so many of history's significant events. This motivation to achieve significance is in humanity because we were originally made in the image and likeness of God, Who is the most significant One. Yet, because of the continuing effects of the Fall of man, this urge toward significance has been perverted and twisted. Pride now causes people and societies to seek their significance, not in honoring and obeying God and thus becoming truly significant, but is the attempt to establish their own name for themselves apart from God. This is the essence of Satan's original rebellion and is the at the core of all human rebellion in every generation. The greatest human kingdoms in history of Babylon, Persia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, etc. were all driven by this same pair of pride and fear.

11:6 - "The LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them."

The Lord responded to the rebellion of the people not only because of what they had done in starting to build the city and tower of Babel, but because of the dangerous implications for the future. There are two spiritual principles in focus in this part of the story. One principle is that because mankind is made in the image of God they have enormous potential within them for accomplishment. Modern history is a powerful testimony of this. The inventions of the 20th century such as the airplane, car, telephone, computer, radio, television, and many more all speak of the incredible capacity God has designed into us as His image bearers. The problem here in the Tower of Babel development is that the Lord is concerned with what will happen when the great capacity of human beings is turned in the direction of evil rather than good. When human imagination and invention are made to serve man's rebellion rather than God's glory the results are never good.

The second principle highlighted is the neutral power of unity. Unity itself is not portrayed as a bad thing here, only a powerful thing. Much later, in the book of Acts the unity of the early church in their faithfulness and obedience to God is a holy and powerful thing. Here, however, the unity of the population is misused to form their rebellion against God. The danger is in the spiritual formula of unity + rebellion. The destructive potential of this combination is exemplified in Nazi Germany, the USSR, and radical Islamic nations from modern history. The Lord does not fail to respond to this dangerous combination. He will bring judgment upon this rebelliously unified nation, but in His judgment is also mercy. In His mercy He does not completely wipe them out as in the Flood, and they are protected from themselves before the full development of their intentions comes to fruition.

11:8 - "So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. "

This is the moment in world history that marks the beginning of the world as we know it today with nations of differing cultures and languages each occupying their own geographic region. To a careful student of world history there are many indicators of this ancient common origin for all nations and cultures. One example is found in the Tower of Babel itself. From archaeology we know the general design of the most ancient tower building. The Babylonian culture was marked by a form of tower building identified as the Ziggurat. It is a pyramid like structure with levels or steps leading up to the pinnacle. The discovery in modern times of almost identical designs of ancient towers throughout the coastal regions of Mexico and Central America and even other places in the world was portrayed as some as an amazing coincidence. The ziggurats throughout Latin America are no coincidence. The peoples that were scattered from the Tower of Babel

traveled all over the world. Each new language group formed took their common architectural knowledge and built similar structures wherever they settled.

Another apparent coincidence is the common elements found in the most ancient myths and legends of almost every culture of the world. For instance most cultures have some form of ancient world flood story among their legends. The names and details differ in each culture, but the similarities are either an incredible chance development or the proof of an even more ancient basis in fact and history. Each scattered language group took the remembrance of the Flood of Noah's time and passed it on within their culture. As just one example among many, the ancient Babylonians preserved a flood story in which one man's family survived the flood that killed all others by building a giant boat in the shape of a cube.

11:9 - "Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth."

The key issue in this event was not the Tower of Babel itself, but in the common world language that unified the people to carry out their own rebellious plans. God's judgment did not destroy the tower, which would have only treated the symptom of the disease and not the disease itself. Instead the Lord judged their common language. Language is a special gift from God. It separates humanity from the birds, fish, and animals. It enables us to understand and communicate with God Himself and one another. It is essential to God's purpose of spiritual fellowship. Yet, here this greatest of gifts from God was the enabling cause of the work of rebellion. God limits the future development of evil among them by dividing their languages, and thereby localizing and limiting their future cooperation.

There is also a fascinating New Testament parallel to notice in connection with this event. From the Day of Pentecost in the book of Acts we read this first powerful work of God in the beginning of the proclamation of the gospel of Christ to the nations.

"And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. They were amazed and astonished, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,

Cretans and Arabs — we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." (Acts 2:4-11)

God Himself miraculously suspends the continuing effects of the Babel judgment on the Day of Pentecost by His Holy Spirit. The message is pointed and powerful. True human unity is intended by God to be achieved only in accepting His Son as Lord.

Genesis 12

12:2-3 - "And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And 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 will be blessed."

This declaration of the Lord to Abram is one of the most important passages in all of the Bible. It identifies a critical shift in focus of the Lord's dealings with mankind. Since the time of the Flood until now God has been dealing with humanity as a whole. He had established basic law through Noah to limit the development of evil and violence, and had given a basic command to be fruitful and repopulate the earth after the Flood. Those guidelines applied to the entire population in the same way. Now, for the first time since Noah, God marks out a specific man and speaks to him words which He does not speak to others. God gives to Abram a specific command and promises of blessing if he obeys that command. The command and promises God gives to Abram set him apart from any other human into a position of special privilege in relationship to the Lord. While the Lord does not use the term covenant in this chapter, later we will see that this is the beginning of what will develop into a covenant relationship between the Lord and Abram.

The spiritual principles involved here with Abram carry their own significance for our lives also. The first thing to notice is that covenant relationship with God is always initiated by God, not by the person with whom God establishes His covenant. Abram did not choose this special relationship with God. God chose Abram, and He chose what kind of relationship they would have. This order of who chooses is important because it establishes from the first moment of the relationship who is in charge in the relationship. In the same way, we did not choose to be saved, God chose to save us. The next principle to recognize is that covenant relationship provides great blessings for the person in the covenant with God, but that those blessings are not just for that person to enjoy. God poured out amazing blessings upon Abram, but the goal in God's heart was to in a sense funnel through Abram His blessings to "all the families of the earth".

God gives general blessings to all people such as life, food, health, etc. whether they are in covenant with Him or not. But, His special covenant blessings He gives only to and through those who are in covenant with Him. The third and most important principle here is the mention of plan of God to somehow bless all the families of the earth. Abram never personally saw in his lifetime all the families of the earth blessed through him. The way God will fulfill this promise is through One special descendant of Abram. Through Jesus, all the families of the earth will be blessed with the ultimate blessing of salvation as God will save some from every tribe, tongue, people and nation as they believe in Christ.

12:4-7 - "So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan. Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite was then in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him."

God commanded Abram to leave his home and familiar surroundings. He was directed to go to a land that he had never before even visited. God had a specific and critical purpose for Abram's descendants in that land, but at this point Abram did not know the details of the future. All he knew was that God had spoken to him and commanded him to leave where he lived and go to this new land. He responded to the Lord's direction with argument or complaint. He obeyed and went forth. Later, the book of Hebrews describes this moment in Abram's life as a moment of noteworthy faith. "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going." (Hebrews 11:8) His faith was not undermined by his incomplete knowledge of the future plans of God. He had to trust that if God had called him to go, that it was to his advantage to go. Often, when the Lord gives us a clear word of command or direction we wait for the full explanation before deciding whether to obey. We should follow Abram's example here and obey God in faith as soon as we are certain that it is Him commanding or directing us. We can expect that God will on occasion deal with us as He did with Abram here. God could have given Abram more details than He did in 12:1. He chose not to give more details because this was planned by God to be an exercise in faith for Abram.

This passage also contains the first Word of God that identifies the land of Canaan as what will become known from this point forward as the Promised Land. "To your descendants I will give this land." God owns it. He is in charge of it. It is in His discretion to give it to whomever He chooses. He promises it here to Abram's descendants, but it is only promised at this point and not yet possessed.

We have a few hundred years to wait until the Lord will later bring Abram's descendants into this land under the leadership of Joshua to take possession of what God promised on this day. One thing we should learn from this. God is a long range planner. When He has planned a promised a thing and then reveals it to us, that does not mean that we will necessarily see it happen then or even soon. God faithfully fulfills His promises in His perfect timing and not at the whim of our preferences.

12:10-13 - "Now there was a famine in the land; so Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. It came about when he came near to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, "See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. "Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you."

After the praise worthy response of faith by Abram in leaving home to follow the Lord's direction to travel to the Promised Land, now we have a development exposing a glaring inconsistency in Abram. After arriving in the land to which God directed him, Abram is challenged by an unexpected development. A famine is in the land. Now why would God cause a famine in the Promised Land? We should be clear that God did indeed cause this famine. In fact, all famines are ordained by God, and none of them are accidental random events of history. In this case God caused the famine for two purposes. Famines are expressions of God's judgment, and this famine was an early judgment from the Lord upon the Canaanite inhabitants of the land. We will read later descriptions of these people that characterize them as a very wicked people.

In addition, the famine also served the Lord's purpose as a test of Abram's faith. The Lord had told Abram to go to this land and He had promised to bless him there. The Lord never told Abram to go there "until and unless a famine occurs." There is no hint in the text that the Lord wanted Abram to leave Canaan and travel down to Egypt. Abram's faith was tested by the circumstance of the famine. Would he trust the Lord in unexpected difficulty and remain where God had called him, or would he leave the place of his calling and follow the food? This is a case where we see even a man of God and a man who had previously shown great faith compromise his faith in an effort to provide for himself what the Lord had promised to provide for him back in Canaan. Unfortunately, we don't even read of Abram praying before he moves to Egypt to seek the Lord for His direction. As a result, when he arrives in Egypt his heart is influenced more by his fears than his faith. This leads Abram into an additional compromise of his faith in his pathetic attempt to protect himself from harm by presenting his wife as his sister. This incident should remind us of the compromise of Noah after showing such great faith throughout the Flood. What we see developing is a pattern of the Lord exposing the weaknesses of the men He calls into covenant.

They are men of faith, but they are not flawless superheroes. God sees their Character flaws and exposes them in order to cause them to grow beyond them.

12:15-20 - "Pharaoh's officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. Therefore he treated Abram well for her sake; and gave him sheep and oxen and donkeys and male and female servants and female donkeys and camels. But the LORD struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? "Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go." Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they escorted him away, with his wife and all that belonged to him."

There is in this development an awesome example of God's sovereignty. We have seen that Abram should not even have gone to Egypt without the Lord's direction to do so. In addition, he certainly should not have lied about the identity of his wife and used her a shield to protect himself and by doing so expose her to a serious compromise of her marriage. Nothing Abram has done in this situation is right, yet in spite of that, the Lord is still watching over Abram and his household. God protects Sarai when Abram fails to do so. Even more than that, God brings something good out of this bad situation. This principle describes what the Lord is doing. "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28). What Abram did was not good. The situation was not good. Yet God caused it all to work together for good in the end. The Lord moved upon Pharaoh's heart to give to Abram sheep, oxen, donkeys, camels as well as servants. When Abram left Egypt, he left a far wealthier man than he came. We see here an example of how the Lord treats us in Christ. As Christians none of us is perfect or without flaw. We may trust God one day as we should like Abram, and stumble in doubt and fear the next day. Yet, God continues to watch over us on our best days and our worst and He continues to build our lives according to His great purpose in saving us, and not according to what we actually deserve.

Questions from Genesis 11:

Question: Is there a significance that the age of procreation and length of life is dramatically shortened this chapter (even a son dying before the father is mentioned for the first time)?

Answer: I'll refer you back to my comments on day five from 5:4-11 regarding the drastically shortened life spans following the Flood.

Question: This appears to be the first chapter that mentions a woman by name, Sarai, (and the other wives of Terah's children, and Abram's brothers) since Eve. Any significance?

Answer: Yes I think that we are meant to notice as you did that Sarai and the other women of Abram's family are the first to be named since Eve. I see two principles at work here. One is that God since has ordained for the fathers to represent His authority as the head of their own family lines of descent, the attention in the records of the generations since Adam focus attention on naming the father of each generation. It is not that the mother does not matter, but that one in authority in each generation is chosen to represent that generation.

Second, Sarai is named along with Abram as a prelude to the dramatic turn of events in chapter 12 in God choosing Abraham. There is a spiritual hint here that God is choosing Sarai along with His choice of Abram to be like Adam and Eve to the new nation He is going to create through them (Israel).

Question: Any reason why this father, sons, and grandson, Lot, left their community moving to Haran?

Answer: Terah, Abram and Lot leave Ur in the years following the Tower of Babel when the Lord caused the population to scatter throughout the world. They are part of that scattering impulse. We are not told how they decided when they left Ur to go in the direction they choose, but we should recognize the Lord's sovereign Hand upon their decision. They set out with the intention of entering "the land of Canaan." This is of course the same region that will later be identified as the Promised Land. It is where the Lord will later establish the nation of Israel. They only made it as far as Haran with Terah, but in the next chapter Abraham will be called by the Lord to continue on to the Promised Land.

Question: Gen 11:10 - Abraham (and subsequently Jesus) was originally of Arabian descent through Shem. In light of world events and our relations with that part of the world now, is there spiritual significance to him (them) originating from that line?

Answer: I'm not sure where you read that Abraham and Jesus were originally of Arabian descent, but that is not exactly accurate. At the time of Genesis 11 there were no Arabians. Shem is the ancestral father of both Abraham and Jesus' mother Mary also can trace her decent back to Shem through Abraham. So we can say that both Abraham and Jesus were Shemites (later referred to as Semites). However, neither Abraham or Jesus were actually Arabian. The Arabian line of descent can trace its origins all the way back to one of Abraham's sons Ishmael. However, the Arabians developed far after Abraham's time so it would not be accurate to identify Abraham as an Arabian. Additionally, Jesus descended through Isaac's line, not through Ishmael, and so He is not considered an Arabian either. As far as your concern with possible connections to current world events and the physical lines of descent of Abraham and Jesus, I would say, no, there is no current connection. Concerns with Jesus line of descent were fulfilled at His birth. The only issue was to be able to establish that the Biblical prophesies regarding a son of Abraham and a son of David were literally fulfilled in Jesus. There is no continuing focus in the New Testament on natural or physical connections beyond that.

Genesis 13

13:3-4 - "He went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place of the altar which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the LORD."

Following the spiritual fiasco of the journey to Egypt because of the famine in Canaan, Abram now returns where he belongs. He belongs in Canaan, not because of familiarity or personal preference, but because it is where the Lord has called him to live. This is a strong practical element in how God's sovereignty intersects our lives. His purpose for us supercedes our purposes for ourselves. We all have our own ideas and plans for how our life should go and the choice of where to live is a large part of that. Yet, what do we do when the Lord's plan would settle us in a place we would not choose for ourselves to live? Sadly, many believers do not even consider their living situation and choices from this perspective. For many the assumption is that we are always free to choose where we want to live with the expectation that the Lord's blessing will follow us wherever we happen to choose.

In this return to Canaan, the Lord led Abram back to square one. He returned "to the place where his tent had been at the beginning..." When we have gotten off track from the Lord's purpose for our lives it may be necessary to go back before we can go forward. As Abram arrived back where he started he found the altar he had formerly built to the Lord and there he worshipped the Lord. It is an interesting contrast with his experience in Egypt. The entire time he was in Egypt there is no mention of him building an altar or calling on the Lord. Now that he is back where he belongs, his heart is moved to worship as he had previously. This is a return "home" both physically and spiritually for Abram.

13:6-9 - "And the land could not sustain them while dwelling together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to remain together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling then in the land. So Abram said to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. "Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me; if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left."

In a developing difficulty between Abram's growing herds and Lot's strife begins between their herdsmen. Each group of herdsmen was looking to protect the welfare of their own herd and saw the other herds as threats to their provision. The implication is that this had the potential to grow beyond argument and dispute. What began as a dispute between their servants could have permanently damaged the relationship between Abram and Lot. Strife is often a subtle danger because it can begin with something small and apparently insignificant, yet it can grow to divide closest of marriages, families, friends, churches, and communities. What is needed in a circumstance of developing strife is for someone to see the danger before it grows out of proportion and take the necessary steps to disarm it. In this case Abram showed both wisdom and faith. He took a step that reflected these two principles from Proverbs. "Better is a dry morsel and quietness with it than a house full of feasting with strife." (Proverbs 17:1). "Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man, But any fool will quarrel." (Proverbs 20:3).

Abram saw the need to keep "away from strife." He chose a resolution that demonstrated that his commitment to walking in peace with Lot was greater than his desire to maintain a more favorable life circumstance for himself. He saw it would be spiritually better for him to risk losing the most advantageous land for his herds than it would be in strife with Lot. By offering for Lot to choose which part of the land to occupy Abram is once again walking by faith like he did before he went down to Egypt. He is trusting that whichever direction Lot chooses to go, that the Lord will bless him in the land that remains for him.

13:10-12 - "Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere--this was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah--like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar. So Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom."

The choice Lot makes in which direction to settle for his home is instructive for us. We don't see Lot stop and pray here and ask the Lord for His direction in the choice. Instead Lot makes his choice the same way most people would. He chooses based upon which option looks better to him and more advantageous to him personally. There seems to be no spiritual consideration in the choice at all. He chose the land that was most attractive to his eyes and he chose "for himself." The intended contrast behind the choice Abram made and the choice Lot made is meant to catch our attention. This principle also applies; "for we walk by faith, not by sight" (II Corinthians 5:7). Abram choose by faith to place Lot before himself. Lot choose by sight to place himself ahead of Abram in his decision. The fruit of these two choices will develop over the next few chapters of Genesis. Abram will be blessed by the Lord for his choice of faith. For Lot, the choice that seemed so favorable when he was making it turns out to be the worst decision of his life.

The lesson here is that we dare not trust our own eyes in making important life decisions. How many people choose their life partner for marriage based upon the most attractive choice? How many choose home location based on the natural benefits of that location? How many choose a job based upon most money / benefits / perks? These things should not be ignored in an important decision, but they are not the first and most important factor to consider. Keep this principle in mind when making the most important decisions of your life; "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Matthew 6:33).

13:13 - "Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the LORD."

The land surrounding the region of Sodom and Gomorrah was gorgeous and compared to the garden of Eden for its beauty. The people that dwelt there were a different story. The men of Sodom are described using three terms which combined paint the ugliest possible picture. They were sinners. Of course, we understand that every single person that has ever lived (with the sole exception of Jesus) is a sinner and has violated God's holy standards. Because we recognize the shared sinfulness of all humanity some erroneously conclude that we are all the same in our sinfulness as though there are no degrees of sin to consider. The truth is that while "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23), all have also sinned to differing degrees.

The men of Sodom are additionally described as wicked, and as if that were not bad enough, they were exceedingly wicked. This combined spiritual description of them as exceedingly wicked sinners is what we would call a value judgment. It reflects the Lord's evaluation of their actual spiritual condition and behavior.

It is critical for us to be able to recognize and accurately identify a person or group that is like this. If not, we will suffer, as Lot did the consequences of missing the danger this group represented to the spiritual and physical welfare of his family. Lot moved his family right into the midst of this exceedingly wicked influence and by doing so exposed them to things that would have serious repercussions for his family's future. We should not be naive and assume that there is no individual, group, or community left on the earth today or in our society that are exceedingly wicked sinners.

13:14-15 - "The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever."

There is a hidden spiritual lesson in this development that we could easily overlook. The hint is in the word "Now" as God speaks to Abram. The Lord had not spoken to Abram for some time. The last communication he had received from the Lord was back before he had gone down into Egypt. The word now indicates a timing issue with what the Lord was about to declare to Abram. The Lord reaffirms His previous promise to give the land of Canaan to Abram and his descendants. The timing of this reaffirmation by the Lord is immediately following the departure of Lot. The Lord spoke this to Abram, "after Lot had separated from him..." The hint is that what the Lord was about to say was somehow tied to Lot's departure. This is connected to the first time the Lord had ever spoken to Abram. He had given Abram a clear command. The problem is that Abram had never completed his obedience to that original command. "Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing;" (Genesis 12:1-2)

God had told Abram to go forth from his relatives. He did not say from some or even most of his relatives, but all of them. This included Lot who was Abram's nephew. Instead Abram took Lot with him to Canaan, then into Egypt, and then back with him to Canaan. The work the Lord planned to do in establishing His covenant through Abram was for him alone and not for Lot along with him. It is only and finally when Abram and Lot separate, which completes the requirement of the Lord's original command that the Lord now sets in motion the fulfillment of what He had promised. While not as bad as blatant rebellion, uncompleted obedience is still disobedience to the Lord who commands.

We should not be surprised when the Lord withholds promised blessings from us until we finish doing what He previously told us to do.

Genesis 14

14:12-16 - "They also took Lot, Abram's nephew, and his possessions and departed, for he was living in Sodom. Then a fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew. Now he was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner, and these were allies with Abram. When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he led out his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. He divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them, and pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus. He brought back all the goods, and also brought back his relative Lot with his possessions, and also the women, and the people."

The choice Lot had made in the previous chapter now begins to bear fruit and none of it good for him. He chose to pitch his tent near Sodom because of the beautiful well watered land. We saw how Lot had not sought the Lord regarding his decision nor had he given enough consideration to the kind of people living in this area. Now, the entire region erupts in a war between the kings of the various cities. By the time the war begins Lot is no longer living near Sodom, he has moved into the city itself. We are not told what motivated him to move into the city, but in his time pitching his tent nearby he should have had enough interaction with the men of the city to know better than to move from the frying pan into the fire. Lot is caught in the middle of this war and captured along with his entire household. It was common practice in those days for conquering armies to take the inhabitants of captured cities to back to their land as slaves.

As word reaches Abram, he is stirred to organize a rescue for his enslaved nephew. All of this is the result of a foolish decision Lot made to move to Sodom. The spiritual principle for us to learn from Lot's mistake is that when people are connected to one another in relationship, the consequences of poor decisions are rarely limited to the person that made them alone. Lot's trouble now complicates Abraham's life. This is the risk involved in committed relationships. Love for one another connects our lives at the level that may cost us some of our own convenience or comfort. Abram could not simply pray for Lot or wish the best for him without acting on his behalf. His love for Lot moves Abram to go after him in the hope of setting him free. In the same way that Abram is committed to Lot, the Lord is committed to Abram. The Lord goes with Abram in his righteous effort to free Lot. Abram shows the courage based in faith, along with a strategy based in wisdom and successfully defeats the kings and frees Lot and his household.

The Lord had promised to bless Abram as well as curse his enemies, and in this battle the results testify to the Lord's faithfulness to His promise.

14:18 - "And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High."

Following the victorious return of Abram from the defeat of the four kings, a mysterious figure meets Abram and pronounces a blessing over him. This is Melchizedek's one and only appearance in the Bible and because of the brief description of him and this meeting it would be easy to read past it without seeing much importance in it. Two mentions of Melchizedek later in the Bible alert us to a greater significance than we would have noticed on our own. The first mention is in Psalm 110 which is a prophetic psalm about the role of the Messiah. The second mention is in Hebrews chapter 7 in which the writer of Hebrews draws an intentional parallel between Christ and Melchizedek. Some Christians have wondered whether Melchizedek actually was Christ appearing to Abram before His incarnation in what is called in theology a Christophany (pre-incarnate appearance of Christ). I believe that Melchizedek was an actual man who lived during that time, and was not an appearance of Christ. However, Melchizedek is most certainly a type, or historical symbol of Christ. There are a few details regarding Melchizedek that spiritually represent Christ and point forward to Him.

The name Melchizedek means king of righteousness. Jesus is the true King of righteousness Who rules on the basis of a life lived in perfect righteousness. Melchizedek was the king of the city of Salem. Salem means peace and Christ is the King of peace in that He alone has established peace between us and God because of His sacrifice for us on the cross. An additional important detail is that Salem is the same city that later became known as Jerusalem. Christ sits enthroned as the King in the heavenly Jerusalem. Melchizedek is identified as a priest of God. He is the only person until Christ that is both a king and a priest at the same time. Christ is both our High Priest and our King. Melchizedek also represents Christ in the unusual way he is introduced in the account. Every important person from Adam to Abram is introduced by identifying their father. Their death is also described. Melchizedek arrives without any mention in the Bible of his ancestry and is never mentioned again so that we have not knowledge of his death. Hebrews draws the conclusion for us that this points to Christ Who has no beginning or end as the Son of God. Finally, Melchizedek serves Abram bread and wine which is in obvious anticipation of the Lord's Supper of bread and wine that Jesus serves to us.

14:19-20 - "He blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand." He gave him a tenth of all."

Melchizedek pronounces a blessing over Abram and makes sure that he understands that this victory over the four kings was more than luck, strategy, or strength. The victory was the blessing of God on Abram's life. It was God Who delivered the kings into Abram's hands. This is the first of many great battles won by the people of God throughout the Old Testament against all odds and only because of the Lord's blessing. Whether it is this battle, or David against Goliath, or Gideon, or Samson or many others, the people of God who fight under the Lord's blessing are invincible. It's a lesson to never forget. Victory is found in right relationship with the Lord and as a direct result of His blessing.

As a response to this blessing from Melchizedek, Abram gives to him a tenth of all. The all referred to here is most likely the spoils of the battle. This passage is the first example in the Bible of the practice that later became known as the tithe. Tithe literally translates as the tenth. By giving a tenth to Melchizedek, Abram tithed to him. The description in Hebrews 7 confirms that Abram tithed here. It is an important example for us because this occurred long before God gave to Moses the Law with its own requirements of the tithe. That shows us that the principle of the tithe precedes the law of the tithe. In the same way the principle of tithing continues into the New Testament beyond the law requiring the tithe. As New Covenant believers we should learn from Abram's response and follow his example. Abram tithed to Melchizedek, and we should tithe to Christ. He tithed, not out of obligation, but in worship in response to a great blessing he had received from Melchizedek. We are no longer required to tithe as they were in the Old Testament Law, but we have received the greatest blessing from Christ and the tithe remains an appropriate response of worship to the blessing we have been given.

14:21-24 - "The king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give the people to me and take the goods for yourself." Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the LORD God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours, for fear you would say, 'I have made Abram rich.' "I will take nothing except what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre; let them take their share."

In defeating the four kings, Abram freed Lot, his family and all their possessions. He also won the freedom of all the other people that had been enslaved from Sodom as well as their possessions. The king of Sodom meets Abram and offers for him to keep all the possessions as long as Abram returns the people of the city. Abram sees in this offer the need to take a stand to represent the Lord. He declares his own faith in the Lord and refuses the king's offer to keep their possessions even though as the victor in the battle he had every right to all the

spoils. He refuses to keep the rest of the spoils so that the king of the city of Sodom could never say that he had in any way enriched Abram. For Abram it was a test of his faith. There is a parallel in contrast here of Abram's previous decision to accept the undeserved gifts of Pharaoh, while now he refuses to accept the deserved gifts of the king of Sodom. Abram's choice here honors the Lord by preserving all of the credit for his wealth for the Lord alone. It also shows us how much Abram has spiritually grown since his misadventure in Egypt. Abram's confidence for his future is now fully in the Lord and not in what man may or may not do for him.

Genesis 15

15:4-6 - "Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness."

This is the point where the Lord introduces to Abram the coming blessing of the promised child. Isaac will later be born in fulfillment of this promise, but it also spiritually points beyond Isaac to the birth of Christ as the ultimate heir of Abram and true Promised One. For Abram, who at this moment had no children and was physically unable to produce children this promise of God to give him a child from his own body was a real test of faith. Then, as if believing that he could one day have his own son was not enough of a test, the Lord assured him that his own descendants would grow to be as numerous as the stars he could see in the sky. This promise of God is way beyond scope of natural believability. Yet, Abram does not question, doubt, or argue with God's declaration. Abram believed both what God told him and he believed in the integrity and faithfulness of the One that promised. Abram's simple faith when given this promise pleased the Lord (Hebrews 11:6). God is pleased when His people place their full trust in what He has declared.

The Lord's further response to Abram's faith forms the basis for our own relationship with the Lord. The Lord "reckoned it to him as righteousness." In this simple descriptive phrase is found the basis for how sinful human beings can live in right relationship with a holy God. The Lord reckoned, or counted Abram's faith as though it were righteousness. This is a heavenly transaction that the Lord makes for our benefit. We have already seen that Abram is not perfect and falls short of God's standard. Yet, because of his faith in the Lord, God accepts him as though he were perfectly righteous. This is the essence of the gospel of our salvation. None of us have lived lives good enough to be accepted by God. Based upon our own righteousness we all would be doomed to eternal

punishment. God counts our simple faith in the sacrifice of His Son as though we were as righteous as His Son is, even though we are not and never could be.

15:12-14 - "Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions."

The Lord now causes Abram to fall in a deep sleep. He speaks to Abram about the new thing He is going to accomplish through him in the future. The new thing is the nation of Israel that will be formed by the Lord out of his descendants that will one day be freed from Egypt. The deep sleep should remind us of how the Lord created Eve as a bride for Adam. "So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man." (Genesis 2:21-22). In both cases, the deep sleep of the man preceded the creation of the new thing that the Lord had purposed. In this Abram serves as a type of Christ and the nation that will descend from him serves as a type of the church.

15:16 - "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."

There is both good news and bad news in the prophecy of the Lord to bless Abram and his descendants. The good news is that the Lord is committed to watching over them, protecting them, and eventually causing them to be blessed. The bad news is that from the moment the Lord declares this to Abram until the time of the fulfillment of the promise there will be a delay of 400 years. This is another huge test of faith for Abram. Place yourself in his position. If the Lord made a specific and special promise to you and your family to bless you, but He told you that you would have to wait 400 years to see it fulfilled how would that affect you? That delayed fulfillment is longer than the United States of America has been a nation by another 170 years. Most of us have difficulty trusting the Lord will do what He said He will do when we have to wait 400 days. This is another strong reminder for us that the Lord's timeframe for His plans do not always coincide with our preferred timeframe. Some divine plans simply will not fit within the short window of what is acceptable for us. The only bridge that can carry our hearts past our desire for a speedy answer and the reality of the Lord's timing is our trust in His wisdom.

There is another fascinating spiritual principle at work here in this declaration from the Lord. He does not give Abram an explanation of why the 400 year long delay except for this one hint in this phrase; "for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." The implication is that the 400 year delay has to do with what God

is doing with the Amorites and not just what God is doing with Abram. The principle behind this statement is that God sets limits of sin for nations just like He does with individuals. The limit represents a line that the Lord has drawn around how much iniquity He will tolerate before He judges that nation and brings it to an end. As God spoke these words to Abram, the Amorites were dwelling in the Promised Land. They had not yet reached the limit God had established for their nation. God timed the release of Israel from Egypt to coincide with the final limit being reached by the Amorites. The Lord was going to use Israel to carry out His judgment upon the Amorites when they conquered Canaan. What we should learn from this is that since He is the Lord over all the nations, that the end of a nation in history is not primarily political or military story, but a moral and spiritual one.

15:17-18 - "It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:"

This event is mysterious and even confusing for many believers. This is when the Lord formally establishes the special relationship between Himself and Abram. Abram had already been called by God, but now that relationship becomes a covenant. A covenant is a binding relationship between two parties. In our society that tends to shy away from commitment in relationship the concept of covenant is becoming more rare. Marriage is a kind of covenant relationship and remains our best example of what was taking place between the Lord and Abram here. The verses from 15:9-21 are describing what we could call the ceremony of the covenant that is being formed. It involved the sacrifice of several animals in an unexpected way as the Lord had Abram cut them in two and place each half opposite from the other half. Laid out in this way, the sacrificed animals formed a kind of path between the halves. Then a smoking oven and flaming torch appear and pass between the halves of the sacrificed animals. As soon as all this is done the Lord proclaims His promise to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abram. What does all of this mean? A passage later in the prophet Jeremiah helps to explain its significance. "I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not fulfilled the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between its parts-- the officials of Judah and the officials of Jerusalem, the court officers and the priests and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf--" (Jeremiah 34:18-19)

The Lord is making a covenant with Abram and in doing so is committing Himself to Abram in a formal and binding relationship. The common practice of forming a covenant required the people making the covenant to walk together between the halves of the animals sacrificed. This is the ancient origin of our wedding ceremony of "walking the aisle together."

The seriousness of walking the aisle was found in the death of the sacrificed animals. It was a dramatic way of saying, "If I break this covenant then let me be like these animals." There was no more serious way to commit to a relationship. What makes this covenant ceremony with the Lord so amazing is that while the covenant is between the Lord and Abram, they do not walk the aisle together. Abram only observes. It is the Lord alone that passes between the halves. That is because in our covenant with the Lord the entire relationship depends on Him and His love, righteousness, grace and mercy. We see the Lord passing between the halves here in a symbolic representation of His presence. The smoke and fire will be seen again when the Lord leads Israel out of Egypt as He promises here 400 years later. A pillar of smoke by day and fire by night will lead the nation out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

Questions from Genesis 14:

Question: Why are we not "required to tithe" in the New Testament? Is the portion of our taxes that pay for the poor, hungry, etc. considered tithing?

Answer: I'm glad you asked because it allows me to clarify my comment on not being "required to tithe" in the New Testament. My wording could easily be misunderstood. I did not mean that tithing as a pattern of giving to the Lord has no place in the New Testament. I personally practice the tithe in my own giving. We are not required to tithe in the same sense that we are not required to worship the Lord in His temple in Jerusalem three times a year as the people of the Old Covenant were. That does not mean we don't still worship the Lord in the New Covenant, and actually should worship Him in an even greater way. There were two aspects of the tithe in the Old Testament; the spiritual principle of the tithe, and the ceremonial law of the tithe. We are not required to follow the law of the tithe in the New Covenant. The spiritual principle of the tithe continues on in the New Covenant. II Timothy 3:16 shows us that the Old Testament examples and instructions regarding tithing were given to us in God's Word to train us in righteousness. That means that Abram's example in tithing (giving a tenth that represents the whole) trains our hearts in the right way to give to the Lord.

Regarding the second part of your question, the answer is no. Any taxes we pay as required by law to the civil government is required by God, but is not considered tithing or any part of a tithe. Civil government is ordained by the Lord, but the taxes we pay to those governments are not expressions of worship as the tithe is. The tithe or any giving you practice toward the Lord is completely separate from any tax you pay to the government.

Genesis 16

16:1-3 - "Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife."

This situation is the second great test of Abram's faith in what the Lord had promised. It is a test that few believers pass without stumbling. When the Lord had first called Abram to leave his home and travel to the Promised Land, He also promised, "And I will make you a great nation" (Genesis 12:2). The meaning of that promise was that Abram would become the father of an entire nation of descendants. Of course, in order to become the father of a nation of descendants he would have to become the father of one son first, and Abram still had no children. When he first arrived in Canaan Abram was 75 years old. Now he is 85 and he and Sarai are not getting any younger. They seem to be no closer to having a child of their own than before. God had promised, but it was ten long years since He did. This test of Abram's faith is in the same area that stretches us all; patience. It is not that Abram had no patience. He had already waited ten years while trusting the Lord to fulfill His promise. The problem for him is that the Lord had given him no specific date of fulfillment. God could fulfill His promise tomorrow, or another ten years from now as far as Abram knew. Now factor into his own difficulty in waiting, the additional pressure of Sarai's strong desire to have a child. We are not privy to the conversations Abram and Sarai had on this subject over this ten year wait, but for Sarai, the wait was over. She decided to do something, and in her decision she approaches Abram with a "solution."

As Sarai communicates her idea to Abram we should pick up on the hint of frustration when she blames the Lord for her childlessness. Notice that she doesn't appeal to Abram for them to seek the Lord together in prayer for His guidance. Instead she has concluded that "the LORD has prevented me from bearing children." She understands that the Lord has not blessed her with her heart's desire for a child, but rather than cry out to Him for His direction, she decides to take charge and solve this problem herself. She proposes a plan to her husband. We might hope for Abram to answer, "Sarai, I won't do that because you are my wife, and we will wait and trust that what the Lord promised He will fulfill in His perfect timing." Instead, Abram accepts Sarai's plan and in doing so allows her to take the lead. We should recognize a spiritual echo here of the scene in Eden when Eve first ate from the wrong tree as Adam watched and then followed her lead into foolishness. One more detail to notice is in Hagar's national origin. She was Egyptian. The probability is that she joined Abram's household in his journey to Egypt.

That compromise of his faith that led him to Egypt is now going to further complicate his life by creating opportunity for further compromise with Hagar.

16:4-6 - "He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight. And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the LORD judge between you and me." But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight." So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence."

As soon as Abram acts on the plan born out of Sarai's frustration and his own reluctance to lead as he should have, a harvest of bad fruit begins to develop. Hagar does conceive, and her heart is captured by pride. In that time and culture, bearing children was the greatest accomplishment a woman could have in life. It was the ultimate status symbol. With Sarai unable to bear a child, and her servant Hagar bearing the child she so deeply desired, Hagar's heart is lifted up against Sarai. Her pride is not well hidden because Sarai is well aware of it. Even though this entire situation was originally Sarai's idea, now that it has begun to backfire on her, Sarai approaches Abram to deal with Hagar. Sarai blames Abram for the situation without any note of repentance for her own role in the development.

Sarai is tasting the fruit of her impatience and not liking it at all. She has not accomplished what she had hoped. Her desire was for a child, but also for the social status that motherhood would normally bring to a woman. She gained the child she wanted, but her status in the eyes of her own servant has diminished not increased. This is God's discipline for her heart. Rather than embracing His discipline and allowing it to humble her heart and grow from it, she lashes out at her husband who made the final decision. Abram responds by again abdicating his proper role as head of the household. He does nothing to lead his wife and servant in a righteous resolution of the conflict. Instead he essentially tells Sarai to handle it any way she wants. He falls into the pattern that many husbands follow of trying to keep peace in their home at any cost by allowing his wife to whatever will keep her from further complaint.

16:7-8 - "Now the angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. He said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?" And she said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai."

Hagar has fled from Sarai and traveled a significant distance from where Abram was camped. She heads south, perhaps with the idea of returning to her original home in Egypt. The Lord has other plans for her and her child and she is found by "the angel of the LORD." This is not just an angel sent by the Lord, which would be an amazing experience by itself.

This is the name found throughout the Old Testament when the Lord Himself visits the earth. The angel of the Lord is what we can describe as a preincarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus. When the Lord appears in this way it is to convey that what is about to be done is very important and that He is fully in charge of what is taking place. The deeper lesson here is again about God's sovereignty over our lives. Sarai made a plan in frustration and impatience. Abram fails to lead as he should and goes along with the plan in his weakness. Yet, in spite of all that, the Lord is going to make long range use of the fruit of their failures. "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28). Their failures are still failures, but God will cause it to work together for a greater good.

16:9 - "Then the angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority. Moreover, the angel of the LORD said to her, "I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count." The angel of the LORD said to her further, "Behold, you are with child, and you will bear a son; and you shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has given heed to your affliction. He will be a wild donkey of a man, his hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand will be against him; and he will live to the east of all his brothers." Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "You are a God who sees"; for she said, "Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?"

The Lord is in covenant relationship with Abram, but He is the Lord over Hagar too. She is not free to go where she wants and do what she wants. The Lord does not consult Hagar regarding what she would prefer. It's clear how Hagar feels about Sarai. She was mistreated by Sarai in her frustration and anger over Hagar's pride about bearing Abram's son. The Lord does not take Hagar's feelings into account in the decision to send her back to Sarai. What is clear is that there is a bigger issue at stake here than Hagar's desires, hopes, preferences, feelings, and decisions. The Lord has a plan and His plan outweighs all other considerations. There is no negotiation here between Hagar and the Lord. The Lord commands and Hagar is to obey.

Even though He does not owe her further explanation, the Lord is gracious to give Hagar a description of His plan. She is going to be blessed beyond measure. He assures her that He has watched the entire situation unfold and that He has a special plan for her and her son. Her response to the Lord shows real faith on her part. She believes that He is a "God Who sees." The Lord has given her a difficult command in requiring her to submit to an abusive authority, but she will be able to obey because He is the God Who sees everything that has happened, is happening, and ever will happen to her. From this point forward her she lives in the awareness of Him watching over her.