

What's the Message – Lesson Eight

Today's lesson continues our study of the family of Shem, and God's call to a chosen member of this family, as recorded in Genesis, chapter 11.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. We pray that this study will bless you, and provide you with a model for your life, one that will enable you to be a blessing to others. Amen.

Last time we saw how the pride of mankind came between the Creator and the created, and how God dealt with their selfish pride. Today we look more closely at the family of Shem, the youngest son of Noah. It may occur to you that the practice of tracing family lineage usually focuses on the eldest son and his descendants.

But God does not always choose that way. Think of Jacob, and later on, David. These were both the younger sons.

In chapter 9, verse 26, we saw that it was Shem upon whom Noah placed his blessing, and we remember that God chooses not on the basis of birth or privilege, but upon the character of the person and how his heart is toward God. Shem, obviously, met God's criteria, and it is his line that is detailed for us to see.

When Shem was one-hundred years old, his first son was born, and from that lineage – as we learned last time – Peleg was born at the time of the dispersion from Babel. Four generations later we read of Terah, who lived in Ur of the Chaldeans, and at the age of 70 became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Once again, while Abram is listed first, as the foremost, scholars have concluded that Haran probably was the eldest and that his son, Lot, was probably closer to the age of Abram.

This elder son, Haran, died while Terah and his family still lived in Ur. Then Terah determined to leave the ancient city of Ur, already an old city by the time of Abram some 1800 years before the birth of Jesus, and go to the land of Canaan. He took with him his son Abram and his wife Sarai, also his grandson, Lot, and traveled up to the northwest along the bank of the

Euphrates River. It appears from the account that son Nahor remained in Ur, for he did not travel with the group.

However, Terah never reached his intended goal of Canaan. When they reached a certain city, one also incidentally named Haran – a city which is located in the very southeastern-most part of what we know today as Turkey – Terah decided he would go no further, and settled there. Terah died there, at the age of 205 years.

Now we begin chapter 12 of Genesis, and Abram comes to center-stage. A pronouncement . . . a covenant . . . is made that becomes the very core of the Old Testament. We read: *The Lord had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*

What did those words mean to Abram, and more importantly, what do they mean to you today? Teacher, what is the message for us?

Notice the three-fold series of denunciations that Abram is to make. First, he is to leave the land of Mesopotamia and all the traditions and false religion of his heritage behind.

Second, he is to forsake the tribe of Shem, a tribe now addicted to heathen idolatry. Third, he is to leave his father’s house, even the other members of his father’s own family. In other words, it is to be a complete and total separation, severing all family ties. This is a demand on a person raised in a tribal heritage that we cannot begin to comprehend. Abram is being called to trust instead, only in God, and to forsake all others.

Notice also that there is another three-fold series in the statement of the covenant, this time a trinity of positive aspects: Abram is . . . blessed . . . to be . . . a blessing to others. We see three elements included here: a promise . . . a command . . . and a purpose. Behind all these is another trinity, for the promise comes from God’s

grace . . . the command establishes man's duty . . . and leads to the ultimate conclusion of God's purpose.

It has been said that here in this covenant with Abram is the central theme of the Old Testament, and that the rest of the Old Testament is only commentary on Israel's failure to keep this covenant. It cannot be stressed enough how important this covenant is to our understanding of the Old Testament, for herein lies the key and summary of God's call and purpose for all mankind.

The full significance of this covenant and all that it entails will unfold before us in succeeding studies, and we leave it for the moment with only an initial understanding of its importance. Next time we shall look further into some more of the essential elements of this covenant.

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Study Aids

Discussion Questions and Suggested Readings for “What’s the Message?” Lessons

Lesson Eight

Questions:

We have begun to see more and more that God chooses and separates out those He will use to fulfill His purpose. This is a major theme that will be continued throughout the Old Testament. This lesson records how He chose Shem, the youngest of Noah’s three sons, and ultimately his descendant, Abram.

Abram was called by God to separate himself from all the secular influences that had surrounded him. But it was to be more than a mere “separation from” those influences, it was a separation for a special purpose, a “separation to.” He was to be separated to be a blessing to all nations.

Can the practice of separation be abused and become an end in itself? Why could this happen?

In what way was Abram to become a blessing? Although this event occurred nearly four thousand years ago, do you share in this calling still today? In what way?