



GRACE CHURCH

The Call of the Wilderness

Genesis 12:1-9

Grace Church | 3.13.22

Here in our second week of Lent, we are examining again a Biblical theology of wilderness. Remember Lent is a time of fasting and repentance to prepare us for Easter. It takes many of its cues from Jesus' temptation in the wilderness before his ministry led him to the Cross. Biblical theology is very simply a way of understanding God's truth by reading the Bible as a cohesive unit: one unified story which points us to Jesus. So we are attempting to understand God's story by tracing the theme of wilderness through the Scriptures. As we do, we can prepare our hearts gradually for Easter, which is ultimately the story of how through the resurrection of Jesus all who trust in Jesus are also resurrected into a new life and a new world: out of the wilderness of sin and into the new Eden, a cultivated garden of perfection where God dwells.

So we aren't tricking you. You know the end of the story before it begins. So Lent then is not a time for despair, but preparation. Although we are being led out of the wilderness of this life of sin, we are not there. So we must be ready, be alert. Last week Luke shared with us the very first chapter in the story: how we got into the wilderness. Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, all mankind was cast from the perfection of Eden into the wilderness of the world. Not only that, but their task to cultivate the land and subdue the earth was put under a curse. No longer would it only be full of only joy, but both work and childrearing, vocation and relationship, would also be full of pain.

The Call of the Wilderness

When we come to our text today in Genesis 12, we actually find ourselves in a grim spot. Last week we noticed how immediately after exile from God's presence, the second generation of man was defined by murder and jealousy. All of this sin culminated eventually in a great act of God's justice. God swallowed up the earth with a great flood of water, bringing with it death: in order that from death he might bring salvation and life. That salvation comes through a man named Noah, who in his obedience to God brings his family through the water in an ark. God makes a covenant with Noah, which we remember with God's covenant sign, the rainbow. But one of Noah's sons, by the name of Ham, is cursed when he discovers his own Father's sin and does not cover it up. His descendants, named after his son Canaan, are also cursed. They will serve the descendants of the brothers of Ham. One of those brothers is Shem, which is significant for this story because the Scripture narrows in on Shem and his descendants in chapter 11, cluing us in that something interesting is about to happen here. Somehow, if God is who he says he is,



he will bring about a descendant of Eve to crush the head of the serpent, and as the families of Eve scatter throughout the earth, God chooses one line for this purpose: the line of Shem. Through Shem, the knowledge of the true God is sustained, even as at Babel the nations are scattered. Here is one family who can still trace their lineage back, who still remember God and worship him.

But Shem's descendants slowly fall too. We find in our text that they have settled in Ur, a great city in that time. The effects of wilderness that they have been cast into have been somewhat mitigated by the technology they developed. Most archaeologists say that in Ur they had ancient aqueducts, baths, irrigation, and sanitation. But even if Ur was the epicenter of prosperity in the ancient world, it was also the epicenter for idolatry. In Ur, the moon was worshiped. Shem's descendants fell into this trap: forgetting the God of their ancestors, the God who brought them out of the waters, and worshiped idols. So, from this line of Shem, down goes the descendants, further and further into idolatry, until we reach Terah in **11:27**. Terah means moon, God is saying: he is an idol worshiper. Joshua tells us that Terah and Abram worshiped other Gods. So Terah has three sons. One is Nahor, one in Haran, one is Abram. Haran dies, so that leaves two. And one of them, Abram, has a barren wife. No mention of Nahor is made besides his son Lot, Abram's nephew. Apparently he is not important to this story. Terah dies.

So there you have it. This appears to be a story about Abram, a strangely ordinary worshiper of the moon. He has found a place for his family in a prosperous city, but he is far from being the Father of nations. He is comfortable, perhaps life is bearable, he copes with hardship. But Abram has a problem. He is the son of Terah, son of Shem, son of Noah, son of Seth, son of Adam. Adam's problem is Abram's problem: the curse of sin. As long as things remain as they are, there is no lasting hope for him in the city of Ur, the city of man. This is highlighted for us in **11:30**. Sarai is barren. Abram has no future hope, the curse of sin has caused the command to multiply and fill the earth to be futile. The last line of those who remember God are idolaters with no dependents.

Friend, you are also a son or daughter of Adam. Abram's problem is your problem: the curse of sin. Every relationship you have, every endeavor you take, is corrupted by sin. So how do you cope? You may find yourself today in a city of your own making, and even feel prosperous: your own little Ur. There are nice distractions there: a good job, plenty of entertainment and pleasure, health and wellness, freedom of thought. But this story of Abram is hinting to us: that life is barren. It may be physically comfortable, but it will never get you back to Eden. You may have built a small oasis in the wilderness of this sinful earth by your own hands, but if God is not there, if it's only idols, it's hopeless. I promise you: one day your health will fail, one day your wealth will be given over to the grave, one day your entertainment and pleasure will diminish to the point where life the joys of life feel more like a feast of sand instead of bread.

What can God make of this mess? Look what God does in **12:1**. The Lord "said". He makes a call. The call is very simple: it's a call for Abram to step out of the comfort of idolatry and into the unknown of the wilderness. The command there is emphatic, literally it can be translated: "Get



Out". Abram's future, as an image-bearer of God, is not to be found in the modern city with all its distractions and barrenness and idolatry and sin. Abram's future, his destiny, is to be found in the wilderness.

Your destiny is also found in the wilderness. Abram is God's instrument for his great and sovereign purposes. Why? Because God said: "follow me" and he could not resist the call. Today, God is also calling you. I have no doubt: he is speaking now through his Word. It is not an accident you are here. If in this season of Lent, you have felt the barrenness of sin, the futility of idolatry, you are in the right spot. God is saying: "don't get comfortable medicating yourself to ignore the pain you are in". Get out, and come with me to the land I will show you.

Today I want to show you three aspects of the call of God. The call of God is sovereign, costly, and full of glory. Then we will end by examining our response to the call of God.

The Call comes from Sovereign Grace

Why did God choose Abram? There is nothing in the text to indicate he had any righteousness of his own. Most scholars believe he is even the last and youngest son of Terah, not the first to any birthright. God's call to Abraham is not because of merit he possesses: the call comes from God's sovereign will. Look how many times the words "I Will" appear in the first few verses. This is not Abraham's doing: God wills it.

Did you know that three major world religions find their beginning in Abraham? Jews, Christians, and Muslims all look to him as their forefather. Billions upon billions of people, living and dead, know Abraham's name. Is it because Abraham has a big vision for his life? No, Abraham is content in Ur. And in chapter 11, we see that he makes it halfway to Canaan with the call of God, but presumably his family doesn't want to come the rest of the way. He is not some visionary with leadership enough in himself, he can't even convince his family to follow God: he must wait until his Father dies! So what makes Abraham great?

God does not call Abraham to his purposes because Abraham is great. Instead, it is the call of God which empowers and enables Abraham to live a life of meaning. Abraham is a moon worshiper, until God calls. Abraham is barren, until God calls. The call of God is absolutely essential. Without it, you may be nice. You may have a full stomach. You may raise your children to be moral and helpful citizens. But you are still an idolator, and so will they. Unless God calls you and calls them, you will never make it back to Eden. The call has to come and disrupt your life, upend it.

But when God calls, everything changes. How is Abraham described in the New Testament, how is he remembered? By his faith. In Galatians 3, Paul gives us this very point. He says it's not because Abraham was full of good works God chose him. Rather, Abraham the idolator is justified and made right before God, made holy because he "heard by faith... [and] believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness." What is our part we play in the story of God



bringing his people out of the wilderness of sin into the new Eden? Remember Ephesians 2: it is by grace through faith that we are saved, not of our own works, so that no one may boast.

Ah, so now we have the story right. Why did God call Abram? Because God is full of grace. He looked down on idolators and said: I will not be silent. I will call them to myself. And when God calls, he also gives the gift of faith to receive it. Abram is not called because he is righteous: it is the call that makes him righteous.

Why do we name our children? It's so we have something to call them by. But those names have power. Usually we don't put too much thought into it, but our names do have meaning, they have power. If you named your child Joy, they can't help but lean into embracing that name. But what if you named your child despair? No one would do that, because inherently you know that they would in some way respond to the negative call in a negative way. Similarly, when we receive a title we feel perhaps undeserving of, it often has a way of changing our thinking and our perception. When I became a Father, I felt so inadequate and unworthy. Often I still do, but something stirred in me to respond to that call. The beauty of Fatherhood worked something in me. Before I never desired to be a good Father: because I wasn't called one! But now that I am, I do desire it.

So it is with the Christian. You were dead in your sin, worshiping idols, and God in Christ sends his undeserving grace to you and calls you his. He says: before your life was barren, come and find flourishing. Before, you lived in futility, come and find purpose. Be my son, my daughter. Come, and be forgiven, free in my grace. And when you truly see how beautiful that call is, how unworthy you are of it, how high and heavenly it to be called by the name child of God: it changes you. The grace of God which calls his people is often called irresistible. Not because it forces you to come against your will, but because when God speaks and reveals himself clearly, when his grace is really shown to you, when he in his grace opens your eyes to see him, it is so desirable and so beautiful that you cannot say no. And when you really see how mind-blowing the call of God is, by faith you are changed into someone who has new desires. Your desire is now to live up to that calling. This call can transform you now matter where you are, and how dark your situation is.

This is Abraham, and this is you. You were not called by God because you were worthy. You were called because God is full of Sovereign grace. Have faith in God's call. If he has called you to be his: what is he calling you to now? Costly Faith.

The Call requires Costly Faith

There are several reasons why the call of Abraham is costly and radical. We can see them when we consider how Abraham was stepping out of what was known: his country, his culture, and his family, into what is unknown: literally the place God says "he will show him" later. That is scary and costly, the unknown. What "known" is Abram called to get out of?



First, Abraham is called to get out of his country. Get out of your country, God says in **verse 1**. I don't think the application of this is to hate the land we live in or something like that, to kill all our patriotism. Rather, the call is to understand that God has not called us to find our comfort in the nations of this world. America will not save you, nor will any human government bring you back to Eden, to perfection. I do think there are some governments who are full of more common grace than others: it's obvious from the horror happening from Russia's depostic attack on Ukraine that not all rulers or political systems are all equally bad or equally good. But what we must see is that the call of the Christian is to yearn for, to journey towards, to have as our ideal and our end, not in man made places, city, governments and countries, but God's country.

Look what God promises to Abram in **verse 2**. He says he will make of him a great "nation". This is a different word than "people". This is a word that implies political and governmental structure. Abraham is not a politician, but he is being sent out by God from his country to one that God is building. The country God is building is not defined by economic ideals. The government God is building, says Isaiah, is "on the shoulders" of Christ. His is a government of peace, a rule of God the king. And that is the kind of country that God is building. We may see glimpses of it on this life, and many of us rightly should be called to build governments and countries full of peace, but ultimately our country is not here. Our country is coming. We are called to get out, to not belong ultimately to, any country where God is not king. Again, you don't have to immigrate. Rather, the call to get your heart and your hope out of trusting in man's country: it is a costly call to be people of peace in a world of war and turmoil.

Second, Abraham is called to get out of his culture. This is what I think is meant by "kindred" in verse 1. Abraham must leave where he is comfortable, with his kindred, with those who understand him and speak his name, for a place of the unknown. He is literally going to a foreign land, where the Cannanites dwell. And what God promises in verse 2 is that he will "make your name great". This is a promise of *influence*, which is ultimately what culture is about. Culture is the water, the name we swim in, that influences us. We say: "I am Texan, or I am educated, or I am White or Black or Asian or Latino." All of these are names, identitties, that have influence on us. At Babel, the people tried to make a name for themselves. Here, God says he will make a name for Abraham. Let me tread carefully here, ok? You have many identities, many cultures. They are part of you, you cannot deny that. The Christian family is not homogenous, where we all look exactly the like or sound alike or think alike. But the Christian family does share its own *overarching* culture, one influence that goes before all the rest. Before any other identity, we are in Christ first.

The apostle Paul understands this. Again in Galatians, he refuting those who say that Christianity is a Jewish religion. There is a specific culture that supersedes the other ones. Greeks can be Christians, but they must also be circumcised, they must also follow the Mosaic Law, that is where our identity comes from. But Paul says all of that is hogwash. And he uses Abraham as an example! Abraham left his culture in order to create a new one. And that culture was not just Jewish, that culture was the culture of Faith, the culture of the gospel. It's love, the free grace of God, that defines this culture now. And now, as White Christians, Black Christians,



Brown Christians, Asian Christians, Texas Christians, Waco Christians: we depart from our original culture on pilgrimage with God like Abram, and then in Christ we can express the love of the gospel culture in all the other cultures we swim in.

Third, Abraham is called to get out of his family. The call is to leave your Father's house. This is a call to leave what is comfortable. We can leave country, we can leave culture, but the most costly call is to leave those knit to us: our own family. Jesus speaks of something similar in the gospels when he says: "whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." What is going on here? The idea I believe is simple: Abraham must leave his Father's idolatry and believe God for himself. He cannot rely on his Father's faith, it must be his own Faith. Teran couldn't make it to Cannan, he stopped in Haran. It's not enough for you to rely on the faith of your mother or father. The call of Christ is neither to assume you are in Christ because of your family history, nor to accept idols into your life because they are part of your family struggle. Your call is to get out and come be a part of a new family.

Ultimately the call to leave family is a call to mission. We all want the security of family and history *and* the adventure of knowing God. But following Jesus is not a nice add on to our life that gives you a little bit of spiritual excitement. It does not promise physical safety, it does not promise financial security. The call of God may require you to leave Father and Mother, to sacrifice your own desires. When you decide to follow Jesus, there is no going back. But look what happens in **verse 3**. The promise is in leaving his family, Abraham will be a blessing to all the families of the earth. See, the call of the gospel is worth it, because when we are willing to leave behind familial blessings for the call of God into the unknown, God will use us in his mission to bless others. When you find yourself in the place of great costly sacrifice for God, there you will find yourself most effective for God's purposes.

The Call Is in the Son

Now, the call of God is hard. But is it worth it? Let's end by showing you why that is an emphatic yes. The promise to Abraham given in these verses is astronomical. Yes, the call is costly, but what is going on here is God is bringing Eden back. First, God promises great people. Sarah is barren, how can this be? God's radical call is backed by a radical promise. Second, God promises a great land. See **verse 7**. Abraham passes through the land, and on the right and the left he sees inhabitants. This land is not empty, it is owned already. There are potential enemies all around. How can this land be his, when he is a stranger and alien? God's radical call is backed by a radical promise.



How does God fulfill his promise? Ultimately, he does it by fulfilling Abram's greatest need. Abram means father: but where is the son? How can Abram be called Abraham, father of nations, unless he has a son? Abraham can't will a miracle out of his old bones and Sarah's barrenness! So for all the cost of the call, none of it matters if he leaves everything only to be barren still. What is Abraham's greatest act of faith? Trusting God will send a son.¹

So here is what I want us to see. Because of the sin of Adam, we are in a wilderness of spiritual need. We are barren, we are idolaters, and we live in the city of destruction. But God calls us out. God says: I am calling you to walk with me through the wilderness to a new Eden, to a new heavens and earth, where the land is cultivated and filled with inhabitants. Come with me, God says, into the wilderness, where through you I will make the wilderness into a garden. But here is the kicker: I will be with you. I will work in you. I will fill you with my spirit. All you have to do is trust me. I will send the Son.

Friends, we can get out of Ur and go with God into the unknown wilderness by faith because Jesus did it first. Abraham is a type of Christ, who got out of the government of Heaven, who got out of the culture of heaven, who got out of the family of heaven, who lived by faith. Christ responded to the call, to get us out to his heavenly government of peace, his heavenly culture of gospel love, and his heavenly family of blessing.

How is God calling you to get out? How is he calling you to meet him in the wilderness, live in an earthly tent, and live by faith? What Ur is he calling you to leave behind. Church, we can go with confident faith into the wilderness of the world. We can count the cost, because Jesus Christ is our great forebearer, our great trailblazer. He is the promised Son born from a barren virgin who fulfills all of God's promises and who is blessing us so that the whole world might be blessed in him. Eden is coming again, resurrection is coming, the wilderness is not forever. But we have to come in the Son, by the Son. We have to come to Jesus by faith. Today, God is calling you to come in the Son. Let's follow him.

¹ I will have to say that I believe this turn of phrase is from Tim Keller. I can't remember where I heard it, but I remember a sermon where he worked all the way to the end and said Abraham must have faith in the son. I realize this isn't much of a reference. I just wanted to be clear, I've heard this before.

