From Babel to Abram: Genesis 11:10-32

Main Idea: God preserves His redemptive purpose across generations, but every person is completely dependent on His grace.

I. A Line Preserved | Genesis 11:10-26

Genesis 11 follows humanity's attempt at Babel to secure a future on its own terms, but Moses follows it up with another genealogy. Genesis 10 traced Noah's descendants out into the nations and Genesis 11:10–26 now traces one branch of Shem's family toward Abram. The opening reference to Arpachshad's birth two years after the flood reminds us that this is not a chronological account of what happened after Babel. Moses has arranged the material so that we first see the nations scattered and then follow the family to the man whom God will make a promise to. God's purposes are not limited to the family He chooses to use in the narrative. The lineage leads to a man whom God will promise to bless so that "all the families of the earth" will be blessed through him (Gen. 12:3). Paul later identifies the blessing reaching the nations through faith in Christ (Gal. 3:8, 14). **The story narrows to one family because God intends to do something through that family to bring Christ to the world.**

Most of these names come with little additional descriptions. We are told how long each man lived, when he fathered the next named descendant, and that he had other sons and daughters. We are not told whether these men were courageous, respected, successful, or even personally faithful to the Lord. When Genesis wants us to know that Enoch walked with God or that Noah was righteous, it tells us (Gen. 5:24; 6:9). God's purpose advances regardless of the accolades of the men and women he chooses to use. That stands in direct opposition to a culture that measures significance by popularity and achievements. Churches can fall into similar habits, judging spiritual health by numbers and charismatic personalities. But in the regular day-to-day life of the church, much of the work that keeps the mission moving forward is done without pomp and circumstance. These deeds cannot earn an individual salvation. **The point is that God's faithfulness cannot be measured by how much of His work is visible to us (cf. 1 Cor. 3:6–7).**

When we read through this lineage, we are reminded that God's faithfulness is not dependent upon the faithfulness of man. That should be an encouragement to believers, particularly when we recognize how often we struggle with sin ourselves. Scripture makes no attempt to hide the failures of those whom God uses, nor does it present their failures as obstacles too great for His purposes. Romans 15:4 reminds us that the Scriptures were written for our instruction so that through endurance and their encouragement we might have hope. But that hope is not meant to just be a comforting thought about God's faithfulness in the past. It should shape the way we live. **Hebrews 10:23–25 connects our confidence in God's promises with our responsibility to encourage one another toward love and good works. We are not called to pursue faithfulness in isolation.** God has brought us into a body of believers who need His grace just as desperately as we do. Remembering His faithfulness should produce humility in our hearts and a greater desire to help one another persevere in Christ.

To Ponder:

1. How do churches and believers fall into the trap of measuring spiritual health solely on the basis of outward works or success? What are the dangers of doing so?
2. How should being reminded of God's faithful nature shape the way that we respond to our own shortcomings and shape the way we encourage other believers who are struggling?
3. What areas of your life are you most tempted to judge God's faithfulness by what you are experiencing? What are ways you can practically fight that temptation?

II. A Needy Household | Genesis 11:27-32

Beginning in verse 27, Moses moves from a succession of generations to the circumstances of one particular family. Haran has died while his father is still alive, leaving Lot without his father. Abram and Nahor marry, but the account draws attention to Sarai, who is unable to have children. Then we learn that the family departed from Ur intending to reach Canaan, but settled in Haran instead. Sarai's barrenness cannot be treated as evidence of some spiritual deficiency. Her inability to conceive would have brought real sorrow, and believers should learn to respond to the suffering of others with compassion rather than speculation (Rom. 12:15). Throughout the genealogy, each generation has continued through the birth of another child. Now we arrive at Abram and Sarai, and there is no child. In the following chapter, God will promise to make Abram into a great nation, but the information given in Genesis 11 make that promise seem impossible to see accomplished. **The future God promises cannot be fulfilled by Abram and Sarai on their own. They will be entirely dependent upon Him.**

Another important detail regarding this family comes from Joshua 24:2–3, which tells us that Terah's ancestral household served other gods. The family through whom God's redemptive purposes will continue is shown to be idol worshippers. We might read that and be tempted to think we're far removed from their idolatry. But idolatry isn't limited to bowing down before a false god. **We are guilty of the same heart problem when we begin trusting in our own righteousness rather than Christ.** We might spend years attending church, studying Scripture, and serving faithfully, and somewhere along the way treat those things as the reason we're right with God. But none of them can make us righteous before God. In Luke 18:9–14, Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in which Jesus is addressing those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. The Pharisee was a religious man who fasted, gave, and even thanked God. But his confidence rested in what he had done rather than in God's mercy. Our confidence must rest in Christ alone. **Our obedience should flow from gratitude for the mercy we've received, not from an attempt to prove we deserve it.**

When Joshua recounts Abraham's history, he places the emphasis upon God's actions: “I took your father Abraham,” “I led him,” and “I gave him Isaac” (Josh. 24:3). Stephen likewise explains that God appeared to Abram before the family settled in Haran (Acts 7:2–4). The initiative belongs to God. This family could not claim that its ancestry or religious devotion had earned the promises that were about to be given. That same principle is central to the gospel. In Titus 3:3–8, Paul reminds believers of their former condition before declaring that God saved them according to His mercy, not because of righteous works they had performed. Paul does not conclude that good works are unimportant. He insists that those who have believed in God should devote themselves to them. **Good works are not the means by which we secure God's acceptance; they are the appropriate response of those who have received His mercy.** We have no grounds for boasting in our spiritual history, nor should we look down on those who come to Christ from very different circumstances. Every believer stands before God by the same grace, and every believer remains dependent upon that grace for a life of faithful obedience. God's saving purposes depend on His faithfulness rather than human merit.

To Ponder:

4. Does someone’s circumstances always reflect God’s approval or disapproval of them? How does Sarai’s barrenness challenge that assumption? (support your answer with scripture)
5. Give some examples of “acceptable” forms of idolatry either in culture or the church. How can we examine ourselves to see if we have fallen into any of these?
6. What gives you confidence in your standing before God? Where do people often try to find assurance of their standing before God?