

# THE MAN WHO NEVER RETURNED

By Steve Zeisler

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Several years ago the Kingston Trio sang a song satirizing Boston politics that became popular across the country. The political debate in Boston concerned whether or not to raise subway fares. The song described a man who spent the rest of his life riding the city's subways because he was a nickel short of having enough money for his fare. One verse pictured his wife throwing him a sandwich through the window as the train went by. And the chorus echoed, "Did he ever return? No, he never returned and his fate is still unlearned. He may ride forever 'neath the streets of Boston. He's the man who never returned " The life story of Abraham might well take its title from the chorus of this song.

Chapter 12 of Genesis opens with God speaking, "The Lord God said to Abram, 'Go forth ' " These words begin the wonderful saga of salvation in which Abram, a man living in an idolatrous city, listened to this call and began his journey. He never went back. In Scripture, he is the man who never returned. Because he obeyed the voice of God and took the first steps of adventure, all the rest of human history has been changed. From Abram listening to and believing God would come a nation and finally a savior. As believers, we are heirs to the promises of Abraham, the man who never returned.

The journey commenced at the end of chapter 11. Abram, together with his father, brother, nephew and their wives, left Ur of the Chaldeas in the southeastern part of the Mesopotamian region. Although it is not easy to be sure of from reading in Genesis, we know from Stephen's sermon in Acts 7 that Abraham, even when he was in Ur, knew that God had called him to an adventure of faith.

He left Ur as a response of faith, and his family went with him although they may have gone for other reasons. Perhaps, they could tell that Abram was doing something important. In any case, the family began this trip together and went as far as Haran. Ur was a Sumerian city, part of one of the great early civilizations. It was a wealthy, successful and important city in its day. But it was also an idolatrous and wicked city centered upon the worship of the goddess of the moon. Haran, the next stop in the journey, was also a city that worshipped the moon goddess. Thus, for Terah, Nahor and others in the family, their travels from Ur to Haran may have been made for religious or cultural reasons. But for Abram, Haran was the first stop on a journey that would lead him to the land promised by God.

The salvation story that begins with Abram reverses the tragedy of Adam. The promises made to Abram are God's announcement that the awful consequences of Adam's decision to rebel are going to be overturned. Life will be given in the place of death. Adam's awful decision led to all the human suffering and darkness with which we are so familiar.

Abram's decision to believe God when he was called began the process of bringing light into that darkness, Through his life and all that would follow, the consequences and tragedy of Adam were going to be overturned. Look at chapter 12, verse 1 through 4:

**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;  
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 shall be blessed."**

**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.**

Notice the series of "I will" statements made by God to Abram. I would like to focus on four of these promises because, as believers, we are the ones who will inherit the promises of Abraham. The great covenant-keeping God who announced these things to Abraham is the same God who announces good news to us.

First God promised Abram that he would take him to a land. Though this promise is made more explicit later in the story, it is important to note its significance here. Abram would have a place on the earth where he could dwell; a place given to him by God. Do you remember the account of Adam and the consequences of his sin? The Lord banished him from the garden, the place that had been his home from his creation, where he had worked, and learned about God and all that was made. When God banished him from the garden, he had to leave the place of his roots. Ever since then, human hearts have longed for home. We all desire to be in a right relationship with the creation again, but we have never found a way to answer that desire.

The Lord God further told Adam that weeds and thistles would grow in response to his attempts to make creation work for him. Instead of naturally and easily interacting with the creation, he would continually be frustrated by it. He would earn his bread only by the sweat of his brow.

When God spoke to Abram, he was speaking to a man who, like all of the children of Adam, had suffered dislocation in his relationship with creation. He did not have a home that was satisfying to him, nor was he able to interact with the created world in a way that was satisfying. Thus, the Lord God made the announcement, "I am going to give you a home. "

Think for a moment about country music. It seems that nine out of ten country songs are written about somebody who is on the road in his eighteen-wheeler wishing he was home with the good woman he left behind. The frequent themes of this music are lostness and loneliness. But these are not just themes of one musical genre. Think of the literature and poetry addressing this idea. Consider the Christmas season we have just experienced. We all make attempts to go home, to seek a place where we belong.

We long to be able to put down roots, to feel like we belong and to not be out of step with the created world. This is one of the deepest needs in human hearts --a home. Most of us have faced the agony of trying to own property in this valley. Purchase of a home in Silicon Valley is a major accomplishment. The amount of money people pay to own a home here is staggering. Yet many are willing to spend it because of the longing for roots.

It is part of the tragedy of Adam that human beings struggle to belong. And one of the great promises to Abram said, "I am going to give you a land, You are going to belong some place " As believers, we inherit the promises of Abraham today by trusting spiritual resources. The desire for home-belonging, community, is met by fellowship in Christ among other believers. It is from him that a healthy relationship as stewards of creation is made possible. The promise of a land first made to Abram is the announcement of God's intention to meet one of our deepest human drives.

The second of these promises is "I will make you a great nation " Do you remember what Adam and Eve were told in the curse as the consequence for their sin? They were told that in pain they would bring forth children. This referred not only to the physical pain of childbirth but also to the raising of children, the difficulty of watching them choose wrongly while not being able to prevent such choices. Each generation hopes that the next generation will be better than they were, and each generation is disappointed. We wish we could, by our efforts, save our children, but we cannot. Every family has had some measure of sorrow in its effort to be a

source of life.

Yet, the promise made to Abraham was that he would have a child and that greatness would result. His whole life story is wrapped up in trying to believe God for that promise. He will eventually have a child, who will have a child, who will have the twelve who will found the "great nation," Finally, out of his line, the savior will come.

At the heart of this promise is the Lord's announcement that the lives of those who believe will have significance. Part of our wanting our children to be everything we hope is our desire to leave a mark on the world. We do not want our lives to be like the ripples made by a stone tossed into a pond which go to the edge of the water to be forgotten forever. We want it to have mattered that we lived. We want to make a mark of some kind, to leave something behind as a result of the years of toil, prayer and effort that made up our lives. We want our lives to amount to something. This is part of what God was promising Abraham: "A great nation will come from you. You will never be forgotten. You will be significant forever."

Children like to carve their names on trees or benches. I remember getting caught writing my name on something at a Christian camp. I was horribly embarrassed at the time, and it is amazing how the memory still causes me to wince. Why do people want to write their names on something? Why do we want to have something named after us? Originally, we were made to be significant, but this was taken away from us in Adam. Thus, God restored this possibility when he said to Abram, "I will make a great nation of you. You will have significance ."

The third promise I would like to focus on is God's statement, "I will make your name great." To the Hebrews, a name was very significant because it epitomized the essence of the person. The name you bore somehow represented you in an important way. This is why the Lord said to Adam, "From the dust (adamah) you came. To the dust you will return" The consequence of Adam's sin was the announcement that man would always struggle with a feeling of worthlessness. Man continually says, "I am really not much more than a handful of dust. Perhaps I have no value at all. "

Every single person who has ever walked the face of the earth has fought every day of his or her life, whether realizing it or not, against feeling worthless. The longing for value and self-worth is a common disease to all mankind. It causes each of us to do all kinds of perverse things--things we are ashamed of, things that embarrass us, things we do not understand. We want someone to say we are lovable, worthy, and valuable. In Adam, we are reminded, "You were taken from the dust. You will go to the dust. You really aren't valuable. " People strike out against this feeling by acting destructively toward themselves and others. They break relationships, or they fumble in efforts to reach out for someone else. All of this is done in an effort to build some basis for self-esteem.

The promise of God to Abram was, "I will make your name great. I will give you self-worth. I will act on your behalf so that you can believe that you are worth something." Only from the Lord God himself can we receive an answer to the problem of feeling worthless. The only place we can go for self-esteem is his announcement that he will make our name great. By his action, we can have value. As we grow to understand this and learn to walk with him, we find the freedom from our desperate attempts to make our own name great. Our worth is given to us as a gift.

My youngest son has learning disabilities, and one of his struggles is with letter-recognition. Although he is almost six, he does not know his letters well, with one exception. He recognizes D-A-V-I-D every time he sees the letters because they spell his name. In fact, if he sees the letters D and A together anywhere, he thinks the word is his name, He always points this sequence of letters out with, "That is my name. That's me!" He is acting out the desire for value we all have. We all like to see our name in print as a sign that we are worthy of mention.

The Lord God said, "I will make your name great " He said this to Abraham, and he says it to those who inherit the promises of Abraham. This is the source of self-worth. This is what we were longing to have and live trying to obtain. But we will never achieve it apart from the activity of God.

The fourth thing I would like you to notice is the word "blessing;" the Hebrew word barak. As part of this word's definition, the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament says: "His presence confers blessing and it is only in his name that others can confer blessing. Indeed, God's name, the manifestation of his personal, redemptive, covenant--keeping nature, is at the heart of all blessing. " Intimacy with God--life that comes from the presence, the name, the involvement of God--is what brings blessing.

The word blessing is used two ways in this paragraph. He says, "I myself will bless you, Abram." God will act in such a way as to bring abundant life, joy, nearness and vitality to Abram, But he says further, "You will be a blessing to others." Have you longed to do good for others, to have your presence in someone else's life accomplish something valuable, to be a source of giving health or life to someone? Most of us want to be a blessing. The promise here is that we can be a blessing to other people because God is present in us. We can be the ones through whom the presence of God is communicated to someone else.

Again, we see the reversal of the tragedy of Adam. Adam was told, "Cursed is the ground because of you." Abram was told, "You shall be a blessing." We are going to bring about a different destiny. The promises of God made to Abram were intended to reverse the tragedy of Adam. For Abram's sake, because of his belief, God brought about blessing.

However, something was required of Abram. Remember he is the man who never returned. He was required to leave his father's house, to leave the culture and way of life that he had grown up with from his youth. He was brought up in a great city and a brilliant culture among a successful people. But he had to consciously reject his father's house and all the thinking that went with it. Before he could see the evidence or the results, he had to trust God and begin the journey.

This is the same appeal God makes to everyone, The good news of hope, love, and life abundant is given to us, but not all of the questions we raise are answered. We are invited, as Abram was, to begin the journey of faith without absolute proof. Thus, we need to actively reject the basis of life handed to us from birth which says that humanity is capable of being everything that it wants to be without God's involvement. And this act of rejection must be based on faith in a personal God, not hard evidence gathered by the five senses. We must leave our father Adam's house and begin the journey like Abram's.

Let us look at the rest of the chapter. Some interesting things happen. Look at verses 5 through 9:

**And 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. And 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. And 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. Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on, continuing toward the Negev.**

These verses describe life as Abram ought to have lived it. From Haran Abram and the others had come to Shechem, a location in the highlands of the land of Canaan. The Lord said, "You have ended the journey. This is the land I told you about." Abram went where he was supposed to go. He spoke with God, and the Lord helped him understand the outworking of the promises. He built altars, the only permanent things he left behind. He led his people in the worship of God, verbally calling on his name. Thus, he was a source of blessing, leadership and worship for others. Living in tents, building altars, and rejoicing in the Lord, he journeyed throughout the land to see the rest of what God had provided for him. This was the life Abram had been called to live. But then came the episode recorded in verses 10 through 20:

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. And 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 it will come about when the Egyptians see you, that 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." And it came about when Abram came into Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And 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." And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they escorted him away, with his wife and all that belonged to him.

In one sense it is encouraging to see Abraham fail so badly. He had just been doing everything he was supposed to do. He had left his father's house. He had believed God, He had gone on this adventure even though he did not know where he was going. It was a tremendously difficult thing he was asked to do since he had no notion of what the future would bring, He arrived in the land, worshipped God publicly, and was well on his way to living "happily ever after."

Then he was put to the test. The land that would be his, where he would have his roots and belong, did not produce enough food. There was a famine, and it became more difficult to live than he expected. "There is no record that Abraham asked God for help or guidance. When the test came, he should have sought the Lord for help. Instead, despite the fact that this land was where he was supposed to be, he used his best worldly judgment and left for Egypt.

There he proceeded to do everything wrong. He acted directly opposite of God's plan announced in the promises spoken at the beginning of chapter 12. When he left the land of promise, he was in effect saying that it had failed him. He threatened his posterity, the nation that would come from him, by having his wife taken from him to live in the house of another man. Abram also brought dishonor to himself rather than see his name made great as God intended. You can almost hear the disgust in Pharaoh's voice when he said, "Get out of here! I don't want to be around you any more." His name was not given worth and value; it was given dishonor because of his deception. And instead of being a blessing to other people, he brought plagues and curses on the house of Pharaoh. Everything was exactly opposite of what the Lord had promised.

Yet, God sovereignly acted to save him. He did not even awaken Abram to repentance before he did so. He just moved in and said, "I will put the story right again." It ought to be encouraging to us to see that even this big failure was not too great for God to overcome. The Lord sent Abram back to the land he never should have left and continued the story.

It is important to recognize that Abram did not become a magnificent, towering man of faith overnight. He knew as far back as Ur that he was to leave his father's house to begin the journey of faith. Yet, the whole family went with him to Haran. And when he left Haran, Lot continued with him. It takes another chapter and a half for Abraham to disentangle himself from Lot. When he arrived in the land of promise, he failed the first test miserably and dashed off to Egypt. It took time for him to learn to trust God as he ought. His faith came in stages; he did not understand everything at once. And I think, as those who inherit the promises of Abram, we should not be surprised when the same is true for us--we will fail tests occasionally, we will get lost and confused, and we will do things partially instead of wholly.

But we also need to recognize the high points of the story. We need to be encouraged that maturity happens over time with growth. At the same time, we must have as our goal the kind of relationship with God that was announced when Abram began his story. We must not follow a path that will only lead to an ordinary human niceness, to occasional religious excitement, and to merely improving the flesh. Do not settle for this.

We need to be believers who are on the road to being given what God promised Abraham: dwelling in a place where we belong, having the significance for which we have longed, living a life that amounts to something. We are the inheritors of the promises --a home, significance, self-worth, blessing. We must believe by faith that we are valuable and worth loving and that we no longer have to desperately seek ways of bolstering our sense of value. We will receive from the Lord a great name and the opportunity to be a blessing to others, a vessel through whom God touches the world around us. This is the kind of living faith that God told Abraham

would overturn Adam's tragedy. We inherit these promises. Do not settle for anything less. This will take time, but we cannot let ourselves quit too soon. If we stay in Haran, we will never find the land God wants to give us. We have to make the choice to leave something behind, to reject what we have always counted on. This is the call of this early chapter of Abraham's story to each of us--to identify what in our lives we have held onto from Ur and perhaps dragged with us to the promised land. What issue or area in your life right now is God most concerned about? To what are you clinging for security? We must identify what it is, actively reject it, and believe that the Lord God is the life-giver. This is the challenge before us.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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