

A summary of Genesis 12:6-20

- 1. Why does it seem that Abraham apparently had little response to God's great promises to him when he was still in Haran? (Genesis 12:1-5,7;13:16;15:1).** When we read the Bible, it is helpful to put ourselves into the shoes of the characters in question. For example, if I were Abraham, what would I do, or how would I react? Secondly, we may ask the Lord many questions concerning what we read, the main question being "why." When God revealed His great heart's desire to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3 through at least four promises, what was Abraham's response? Apparently none. Of course, he left Haran in v.4, so in that sense we can conclude that he listened to God's speaking to leave his country, his relatives and his father's house. Yet he had no visible response to the tremendous promises that God had made him! Let us ask another question: why did Abraham build an altar to the Lord only in v.7? Why did he not build one when he left Haran? Why did he wait to travel 500 km. from Haran to Shechem before building one? Perhaps v.7 may indicate the reason. God again appeared to Abraham and made a further promise, or clarified His earlier promise, by saying that He would give to Abraham's offspring (descendant) the land. This promise, phrased in such a specific way, struck a chord with Abraham: "Your offspring." This was Abraham's need. He wanted a son. He needed a son. No doubt becoming a great nation, being blessed, becoming a blessing, and all the families of the earth being blessed in him, sounded attractive and intriguing, as well as the added clause of blessing and cursing those who would bless and curse him. But all of that may still have seemed "theoretical" and "impractical," as long as his immediate need remained unfulfilled. And then when God mentioned an "offspring," Abraham reacted and built an altar (v.7). And so it is with us. We read the Bible, we attend meetings and conferences, we hear many messages about God and His love and His purpose. Do we understand? Perhaps not much, or hardly! We have our own needs. For example, as a student, we need to obtain good grades to enter Cegep or university, to find a good job. We read in the Bible how God told Abraham not to be afraid, that He would be his shield and exceedingly great reward (15:1). Like Abraham, who responded "Oh Lord God, what will you give me, seeing for I continue childless...?" (15:2), we also may respond in the same vein, "Lord, that is fine. I know You are with me, but what about my grades, what about my job applications?" Our need seems to "supersede" God's need. God understands this, and that is why perhaps in 12:7 He targets Abraham's need and incorporates it into His original promise without in any way diminishing the grandeur of the latter. Thus we also may learn, when we are with the brothers and sisters and minister to them, to know their need (generally human needs), without "overpowering" them with God's need at a time when they are unable to assimilate it, and yet bringing them, through their own need, to realize God's need and how their true need is in fact God's need. Abraham went through such a process and it took time, and so God came in again and again to repeat, to rephrase and to reinforce His promise of a seed (13:16;15:4-5). Each time, Abraham heard the promise yet could not see it forthcoming. He was aging and so was his wife Sarah. How could they possibly have a son? We also go through the same process. May we always respond to the Lord, and even question Him when we do not see the visible outcome. May we also record our transactions with the Lord, preferably in writing, to eventually prove how real the Lord is, even when we do not understand, as we will see in the next point.
- 2. Did the Lord fulfill His promise in Genesis 12:2-3? (Genesis 12:2-3,5,17).** As we saw in the previous point, Abraham did not demonstrate a visible response to God's promise in 12:2-3. Did God therefore refrain from fulfilling His promise to Abraham? It depends on our understanding. Verse 5 tells us that Abraham had many possessions and people that he had acquired while living in Haran. This may be one fulfillment of the promise that God made to him earlier, on the physical or human level. Then verse 17 tells us that after Pharaoh took Sarah into his house, God afflicted him and his house with great plagues as a result, even though Pharaoh had done nothing wrong and had even acted within his rights, based upon Abraham's injunction to Sarah to say that she was his sister (v.13). God nevertheless blames and judges Pharaoh, thereby fulfilling the negative aspect of His promise in 12:3. We sometimes say that God did not answer our prayers, or that He has not fulfilled His promises in our life. When we pray, we need to pray specific prayers, not general prayers. If we pray general prayers, the Lord may answer generally. If we pray specifically, the Lord may respond specifically.. Then we should ask the Lord, "Lord, did You fulfill my request?" "When did You fulfill it?" "How did You fulfill it?" We should take a further step and write down each answer to prayer. Otherwise, it may seem as if God never answered our prayer because we never wrote down the answer. It is so easy to forget what God did. God will answer our prayer, and we will remember it if we write it down!

- 3. God not only answers our prayers, but demonstrates visible proof of His answer (Genesis 12:6-7).** Abraham journeyed from Haran to Shechem, in the land of Canaan, a journey of about 500 km. "Shechem" in Hebrew means "strength," the strength that God gives. Yet the Bible inserts an interesting phrase in v.6: "At that time the Canaanites were in the land." Is this merely a historical fact that the narrator (Moses) threw in, or does it carry a more significant meaning? The Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, were giants, much larger than the average man who walked the earth (Numbers 13:28-33) and obviously posed a serious threat to any nomad or sojourner who entered their territory, especially if he or she were rich. Was Abraham afraid when he encountered the Canaanites. This is a debatable question and the Bible does not tell us. However, the Bible does tell us that God protected him, and even more appeared to him in 12:7 to promise him an offspring who would inherit the very land inhabited by the Canaanites. Through this promise, Abraham had an actual experience of the Lord's strength. Consequently, he built an altar to the Lord in consecration and recognition of the strength that God had given him. Thus, the mentioning of the Canaanites functions as visible proof that God was real and was with him. Similarly, we also need proof that God is real to us. What is our proof? Firstly, the Lord's answer to our prayers. Second, our next step in response to the Lord's answer. Abraham's next step was to build an altar. What is our next step? Our next step may be to write down how the Lord did indeed answer our prayer. If we do not write it down, we are so prone to forget how merciful, righteous, loving and gracious our Lord is. Everything we experienced will be easily forgotten and we may end up declaring that God is not real, or that He was never real, or that it was all our imagination. We are fickle, whimsical and unreliable people, at best. May we take steps to solidify the work that the Lord has done in our lives, to always be reminded of His faithfulness and love during our all too frequent times of weakness.
- 4. What does it mean to pitch a tent and live a life of the tent, as in the case of Abraham? (Genesis 12:8; Hebrews 11:9-10).** Let us first look at the different references to pitching a tent: Gen 12:8 From there he moved to the hill country 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/or called upon the name of the LORD; Gen 13:3-4 And he journeyed on from the Negeb as far as Bethel to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of the LORD; Gen 13:18 So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD. Pitching a tent means that one is living a life of a sojourner, temporarily, without settling down permanently, and therefore desires to move to another location (in the Old Testament, this is a physical place, but to us now, living in the New Testament, this is a spiritual ground or a realm). Abraham not only pitched his tent but also built an altar and called on the name of the Lord. In other words, he consecrated himself and his family and their living to God, just as we now consecrate ourselves, our family and our living to Christ and the church) in oneness with and dependence upon the Lord (calling upon His name). Lot also pitched tents (13:5 And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents). However, the difference with Lot was that he followed his uncle Abraham (a type of a relatively mature brother who also pitched tents), thus receiving and enjoying the same blessings but without any deep and solid experience of building an altar and calling on the name of the Lord. Very often many saints fall into this trap. Therefore, as serving ones or ones who would like to serve, we must serve in such a way that we avoid producing "Lot" in the church life. What does it mean to live a life of the tent? For example, Abraham was very rich, since God had blessed him, as we have seen. What about us? For example, if we buy a bigger house or if we move into a bigger apartment and our standard of living improves, where is our heart? Are we captured by our upgraded lifestyle? A practical test is our participation in the financial grace offering. Do we offer one tenth of our income to the Lord? Many buy a house but do not offer. It is not easy to offer one tenth to the Lord. We will never have enough money to offer to the Lord! For example, there will always be legitimate things that will frustrate us: the care of our elderly parents, the care of our children and their education. There will always be things that will try and prevent us from living a life of the tent. A life of the tent is a pilgrim's life, a life that is not settled, a life that is always seeking the next step, in response to the Lord's speaking. How can I follow the Lord another step? If we are settled or comfortable, it will be difficult. Is education important? Yes. Is our job important? Yes. Is our family important? Absolutely. Is our housing important? No doubt. But where is our heart? Is Christ our goal, our objective, and is the church our living? When we pitch our tent and build an altar and call upon the name of the Lord, we do not trust in any of these things, however important they may be. Our trust is in Christ and in the Christ who lives in the saints.