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Chapter 1

Hearing the Call of Grace



ABRAM

The story of Abram begins before he is born. God was at work in the world. He created everything we can see and can't see. He created the first man and woman and watched as they chose disobedience. He fashioned animal skins to cover them. Their choice had consequences. They were forced to leave God's presence.

And when people had walked so far from His plan, God spoke to Noah and had him build a boat. The ark was salvation for Noah and his family. Those outside perished. Those inside lived. And from that remnant, people and animals populated the earth. But people continued to walk away from God. They believed in themselves, not in Him, and built a tower to show

their strength. So God confused their language and scattered them.

And it was to one of these scattered people, at just the right time, that God spoke clearly. God invaded the heart of a man named Abram with fantastic words and unbelievable promises.

Abram chose to believe.

God said He would bless Abram, He would make his name great, and He would bless the entire world through his descendants. Abram's job was to believe. Then, acting on that belief, he was to leave his relatives and his country for a place God would provide. And believing, he would leave and then possess God's promises.

Abram packed and left everything he knew because God had given a promise. These are the first steps of Abram. This is the call of grace.¹



The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. The journey of grace begins with hearing its call. And grace is calling you. It may sound distant, like a train whistle across a barren landscape, but grace is calling every heart. And the grace we're talking about will not be thwarted. As

John Newton wrote, it will “lead us home.”

Your responsibility is to listen to this whisper. You have to be *willing to hear*.

Which brings us to Abraham, known early on as Abram. Here was a man ready for the call of grace.

Fifteen chapters in Genesis tell us about Abraham’s journey, God’s covenant with him, the promises He made, and how you and I are affected by those promises today. He had moved with his father, Terah, and extended family to a place called Ur. They had carved out a pretty nice life. Abram had married a woman named Sarai. He hit the beauty jackpot with her, which was both a blessing and a curse. Her beauty would cause him to make some bad choices. Actually, it wasn’t her beauty; it was Abram’s fear. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves.

After Terah died, Abram received a message from God.

Stop and consider that. Direct communication from the Almighty. Have you ever desired such a thing? Have you ever said, “If God would just tell me what to do, I would gladly do it”?

Really?

If God were to speak to you right now, part the clouds, His voice booming, would you listen? Would you obey immediately? Or would you question? Would you doubt it was

really God—wonder if perhaps you were dreaming or if it might have been the spicy salsa during yesterday’s dinner?

“Could You tell me that one more time, please? And let me get my recorder.”

Here’s the truth. You don’t need a bass voice from the clouds. God has spoken—not the way you might desire, but He has spoken through His Word made flesh, through the Scriptures, through the lives of believers throughout the centuries. The question is not whether God will speak. He has. The question is, are you willing to listen? Will you *hear*?

Abram was willing. This is what God said:

Go out from your land, your relatives, and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.

That’s pretty straightforward. Leave everything you’ve known, all the people who know your language, your customs, your relatives clamoring to help raise your children—just pick up, pack, and go. Put your future, your family, your fortune, and your life as you know it completely in My hands.

Oh, and by the way, I’m not going to tell you where you’re going. You don’t get to know the specific destination. It could be a beautiful place; it could be a desert. You have one job.

Trust Me. You don't get a postcard picture of your final destination. But no matter where I send you, no matter where you go, you have Me. And this process of leaving will begin to change you on the inside. You will be forced to firmly put your affection on Me, not on an object or a destination or a feeling or even the knowledge of My will. This is not about you finding a decoder ring or reading between the lines of what I'm saying and counting every fifth letter for the secret message. I don't want you trusting your own holiness, some idol you can fashion with your hands, or something you can conjure up in your mind. You must want Me and no other. Period. This is faith. And those who put their faith in Me receive extraordinary grace.

At this point in the story we're not told of any response Abram had to God's voice. We can assume he was a little shocked to be receiving such communication, for in all of Scripture there is a fair amount of fear and trembling and falling to the ground when angels or God Himself speaks. It's a bit unnerving.

But this was not the end of the heavenly communique. God continued with the second half of His message. This is where it gets really good.

I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, I will curse those who treat you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

Wow. Let's process the message. You need to move. Now. And I'm going to bring you into a land I've chosen. And in the midst of this I will do extraordinary things in and through you. You will be blessed and you will bless others. (Which means that your life and the lives of those who come after you will be made wildly different because of your obedience.) And those who get in your way are in My way. In other words, I'm with you, Abram. You and I are a team. And I, Yahweh, the Lord, I'm the one doing this. You obey Me. Follow Me. That's your part in this plan.

Deep breath.

Okay, did you get all of that? God is for Abram. Frankly, I'm a little jealous. (I keep thinking how great it would be to hear directly from God.) I get that God is directing Abram, telling him what to do and where to go, and that the end of this story will be great blessing for Abram and those who come after him. We're still talking about him today, thousands

of years later, so it's clear God was right. This man was abundantly, amazingly blessed.

But wait. Think about the question behind the story, lurking under the surface of the promises and blessings.

Why? Why Abram? Why did God give him the privilege of hearing this directive? Why did He choose to bless Abram and all his descendants? Why was God even thinking of this man? *What is man that You remember him?* A descendant of Abram would later pen that in Psalm 8.

The answer isn't that Abram was the special one God knew would follow perfectly, because he didn't. He made mistakes. Lots of them. He was flawed, fallible, and not a good example for the kids in Sunday school you want to teach to always be honest. In fact, all of the ancestors of Jesus were of similar make and model. They messed up their lives in a thousand ways.

Did God choose Abram because he was wealthy and God needed a lot of livestock? No, He owns it all. He didn't need Abram's wealth or beautiful wife. The only ability God needed from Abram is the same ability He desires from you: availability. And if you are not available, He will use stones or donkeys.

Why did God choose Abram?

The answer to this can only be found in the mysterious grace of God. His unmerited, undeserved, and unlimited favor was poured out on this man. Extraordinary grace.

To his credit, Abram obeyed, packed up, and at seventy-five began a journey that started with hearing God. He listened and followed. His belief affected his actions and he was given credit for his faith.

But do you think Abram struggled? As they were loading up his possessions (imagine the yard sale!) and saying goodbye to those left behind, do you think there were questions? Were there conversations in the tent at night with Sarai?

“Go over this one more time and tell me what He said. Are you sure about this, Abram?”

Perhaps Sarai had heard the message from a distance. Perhaps she had such great trust in Abram that she simply turned and began to pack without question.

Hearing the call of grace forces you to decide. Follow or stay? (And indecision is a decision.) But any struggle like this leads to questions. More questions than you had before God spoke. God will complicate your life when He whispers His grace, and this seems counterintuitive. Hearing from God should make things easier. Now you know what to do. In Abram’s case, he knew specifically how to respond. But the

voice of God will put such a radical call on your life that it will force you to wrestle with yourself, the people you love, and your stuff.

The followers of Jesus had the same experience. He brought so many more questions because they realized His call on their life was not superficial but subterranean. He didn't just want them to adhere to a list of rules and regulations like the religious leaders of the day. He didn't want daily devotions and showing up at a weekend service. He didn't want to make His followers better. He wanted to transform them through the process of grace—the same process Abram learned through hearing the voice of God.

Following the call of grace will become the seedbed of faith. And these questions are good, for the person with questions must learn to trust not themselves but in God's power and direction.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding; think about Him in all your ways, and He will guide you on the right paths.”

Abram lived that proverb. Abram embodied those words. And another of his offspring would pen them. Another man in the line of Jesus. Another flawed human being who was graciously used by God.

Grace will uproot you. Grace will relocate your heart. Grace will move you so far toward God that, in the end, you won't care how much the moving van costs. In fact, you may want to leave some of that stuff behind because it will weigh you down. Grace liberates and casts a vision for your life you could never predict. Grace changes you; it is a holy transfusion giving you the power and ability to pass the same grace on to others, for you can only give what you possess.

Abram heard. Abram responded. He believed. Not perfectly. Not without trying to take control, which we'll talk about next.

Are you ready for this kind of grace? Would you like transformation instead of a limited makeover? Listen for the whisper of grace in your life. He is drawing you to a thousand-mile journey of the heart.