

# THE CALLING AND SENDING OF ABRAHAM AS A MISSIONARY TO THE NATIONS: A RELEVANT MISSIONAL MODEL FOR TODAY

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## **Introduction**

This article is a reflection on God's calling and sending of Abraham as a missionary to the nations. It does so by trying to answer some basic questions - why was it necessary, who is Abraham, what was the core theology of his mission, and how did he respond to his God-given mission? At the end of each section we have drawn out some lessons that are relevant for our contemporary engagement in mission.

## **Why was the calling and sending of Abraham necessary? Redemption of humanity and creation**

To appreciate the importance of our theme we must briefly narrate the past events that necessitated Abraham's calling and sending as a missionary; and that means giving a summary of Genesis 1 to 11:9.

In Genesis chapters one and two God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, crowned his work by creating human beings in his image (Genesis 1:26). God commanded that they were free, but the freedom had to be exercised accountably and responsibly (Genesis 2;15-17). Unfortunately, both human beings, male and female freely chose to act against God's will and purpose (Genesis 3:1-7). From then on the Bible presents us with two realities running side by side. On the one hand, human beings repeatedly rebelled against God , and consequence of such rebellion is summed up in these words,

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. (Genesis 6:11-13)

On the other hand, we have God's prevenient grace acting alongside human sinfulness. God took the initiative to call Adam and Eve from their hiding place among the trees (Genesis 3:8-10). God graciously promised them that He will crush the head of the Serpent (Genesis 3:15). God kindly replaced the fig leaves that human beings had used as clothing with clothes made out of animal skins that would last longer (Genesis 3:21). And to ensure that Adam and Eve will not take the fruit from the tree that gives life, eat it, and live forever in sin and remain unredeemable, the Lord God sent them out of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:22-24).

To be sure, God punished humanity for being rebellious with the flood but after the flood human beings are again sent forth under God's blessing to multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 9:1). In Genesis 10 the descendants of Noah obey God's command to scatter or spread (see Genesis 9:1, 10:18, 32); but not long after this, human beings stopped spreading and instead settled. In a self-centered arrogance that sought to promote human supremacy over God, they decide to build a tower leading to heaven in order to make a name for themselves (Genesis 11:1-4). But God intervened and compulsorily scattered them by confusing "their language so they will not understand each other" (Genesis 11:9). Chris Wright has vividly and powerfully summed up the human conditions that called for God's redemptive intervention.

From Genesis 3-11 on one hand everything is tragically adrift from the original goodness of God's purpose. The earth lies under the sentence of God's curse because of human sin. Human beings are adding to their catalog of evil as the generations roll past - jealousy, anger, murder, vengeance, violence, corruption, drunkenness, sexual disorder, arrogance, etc.. Every inclination of human hearts is perpetually evil. Technology and culture are advancing, but the skill that can craft instruments for music and agriculture can also forge weapons of violent death. Nations experience the richness of their ethnic, linguistic and geographical diversity along with confusion, scattering, and strife.<sup>1</sup>

To redeem humanity and the whole creation from the power of sin, death and Satan, (Genesis 3:15), God must start a new creation. In

other words, “in uttering this promise, God is already hinging at the coming of his new community and the deliverance of human beings and the world from the power of Satan”.<sup>2</sup> Now the main issue is, ‘who is going to be used by the triune God to fulfill His promise of redemption, humanity and the rest of creation? The calling and sending of Abraham as a missionary to the nations is God’s initial response to the human predicaments that will be fully realized in Christ Jesus. But who is Abraham, where did he originally come from, and what will be his role in fulfilling God’s mission for the nations?

### **Who was Abraham? - One of Terah’s Three Sons**

Terah was the father of Abraham; he had three sons, Abraham, Nahor and Haran. They were all born in the city of Ur of the Chaldeans, (Iraq, NE of the Persian Gulf). Haran had a son, Lot and two daughters, Sarai and Milcah. Haran died in Ur while his father was still alive. “Of these, Nahor took Milcah as wife, and Abram took Sarai, because marriages between uncles and brothers’ daughters had not yet been forbidden by the law”.<sup>3</sup>

The people in the city of Ur worshipped many gods, including moon-god Sin. According to Augustine, an African theologian, the Chaldeans “were deeply immersed in unholy superstitions. It was only the family of Abraham that worshipped the true God”.<sup>4</sup> Jerome also tells us that “the whole family of Terah was severely persecuted for their faith, and had to leave Ur on their way to Canaan”.<sup>5</sup> Joshua alluded to this when he told the Israelites at Shechem that long ago their ancestors lived in Mesopotamia where they worshipped other gods. One of those ancestors was Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor. (Joshua 24:2).

Initially, Nahor did not accompany the family when they left Ur on their way to Canaan. Augustine suggests that when Terah and the family left Ur on their way to Canaan Nahor did not go with them because he “had lapsed from the piety of his father and brother, and adhered to the superstition of the Chaldeans”.<sup>6</sup> Later when he repented and turned to the Lord he was persecuted as a suspected person, and he had to emigrate to Mesopotamia. Later when Abraham wanted a wife for his son Isaac he sent his servant to Mesopotamia, where Nahor and his wife Milcah had settled (Genesis 24:10).

There are two important lessons that may be deduced from what has been said about Terah and his household, when considering God's mission. First, God was actively present in Ur where superstition, idolatry and paganism existed. God was never absent from that city. God, graciously chose to make himself known to the household of Terah when they were still idol worshippers and "ungodly". We do not know the circumstances that brought them to faith in the true God. What is certain is that it was after they had believed that they were sent out. Thus, missionaries should always understand that they themselves or their ancestors were pagans before God made Himself known to them, and later called and sent them to other pagan nations. Again, missionaries must humbly acknowledge that they do not take God to the nations where they are sent. God has preceded them in the countries they are to serve.

A second lesson is that, persecution is an important means for the spread of the good news, as found in the family of Terah who migrated from Ur towards Canaan due to persecution. This is true in New Testament times as well. For example, the persecution of Stephen caused the disciples in Jerusalem to scatter, and in so doing, Philip for instance, took the good news to Samaria and beyond (Acts 8:1-5). In the early church this reality is summed up in the words of Tertullian, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church"<sup>7</sup>, when he was demanding a legal toleration for Christians who were being persecuted within the Roman Empire.. The fact is persecution has precipitated the spread of the good news, and it started with the family of Abraham, the father of the nations.

### **What was the theological foundation of God's Mission to the nations? -The Grace of God**

The biblical foundation of God's mission is His grace, expressed in mercy and compassion. This is profoundly true in the calling and sending of Abraham to the nations. As we have said earlier, in Babel human beings' determination to make a name for themselves by procuring their salvation failed with God's intervention (Genesis 11:1-8). In the case of Abraham, however, to ensure that the fulfillment of God's mission through Abraham is founded on God's grace, and not on any goodness of Abraham, God made the

promise to him when his wife was barren. Humanly speaking, it is impossible for the promise to be fulfilled in barrenness. In fact, Abraham himself at one point doubted whether this was actually going to happen when Sarah was barren. But God assured him that He will act through the barrenness and make the impossible possible. (Genesis 15:1-6; Romans 11:11-12).

Again, at Babel the people wanted to make “a name for themselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4). But in the case of Abraham it is God himself who graciously said to him, “I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2). Therefore, God’s mission that began with Abraham was founded on God’s grace alone. It did not depend on Abraham’s moral and material achievements, nor on his ethnicity and nationality. It was purely by God’s grace expressed in mercy and compassion that he was called to be God’s missionary to the world.

The fact that God’s mission is founded on God’s grace is extremely important for all generations. In the Old Testament the nation of Israel, that had their ancestral root in Abraham, had to be constantly reminded that God’s choice of them in reaching out to the nations was based on grace and not because they were any better than other nations. This is clearly stated in Deuteronomy chapter seven:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. (Deuteronomy 7:6-9, emphasis mine)

Elsewhere, prophet Amos reminded the people of Israel that essentially, they were no better people than the other nations around

them, and that they had no advantage over them. “Are you Israelites not the same to me as the Cushites?” declares the LORD. “Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” (Amos 9:7). In the book of Jonah, the main missional lesson is that Jonah, as a representative of Israel, should know that God deals equally with all the nations including Israel on the basis of grace understood in terms of the mercy and compassion of God, and that God’s grace does not have any limited boundaries. Although Jonah clearly understood that God’s salvation is based on grace alone, he felt that it should be limited to Israel. This truth is clearly expressed in the complaint he made to God when the people of Nineveh heard his message, responded with fasting and repentance and turned to God and were forgiven. “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (Jonah 4:3). Jonah certainly accepted God’s gracious acts in mercy and compassion towards Israel, but he did not want God to extend the same to other nations. What Jonah needed to know is that God’s grace, which is foundational to God’s mission to the world of the nations, is not limited to Israel.

Time and space will not permit us to show that the same truth is found in the New Testament. It will suffice to say that in the missional work of the Lord Jesus Christ he had compassion on people in the peripheries of Jewish society that the Pharisees had categorized as ‘sinners’ and ‘tax collectors’, unworthy of God’s grace. Jesus strongly rejected their position. He applied the same principle of grace to Gentiles, Samaritans, women, children, lepers, etc, who were outside the Jewish community. Because God’s mission to the nations is informed by God’s grace no one is exempted.<sup>8</sup> Charles Wesley, an 18th century Oxford theologian and renowned music composer, has captured the limitlessness and the immensity of God’s grace in time, space and ethnicity, in these words:

Thy sovereign grace to all extends.  
Immense and unconfined:  
From age to age it never ends;  
It reaches all mankind.<sup>9</sup>

In short, in the calling and sending of Abraham as a missionary to the nations, God was and is setting up His grace as a foundational model for God's mission in all generations, "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:21-24).

However, we must also state categorically that the fact that grace is foundational to God's mission does not mean that human beings have nothing to do in the fulfillment of God's mission. To understand this point, let us listen attentively to what God said to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-4. It reads:

The LORD had said to Abram,  
"Leave your country, your people and your father's household  
and go to the land I will show you".  
"I will make you into a great nation  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."  
So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with  
him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from  
Haran. (Genesis 12:1-4, NIV)

It is important to note that in the above passage, God's speech falls into two halves. The first part is an imperative saying to Abram, "Get yourself up and go", and it is when Abram has done his part that the Lord will fulfill His part by making him into a great nation. The second part is where Abram is to be a blessing, and then the Lord will bless those who bless him. This is clear from the Mesoretic Text, where the verb 'blessing' is imperative, "And be a blessing", and not imperfect, "and you will be a blessing", as rendered in the NIV. In effect, what God is saying is that Abraham has a role to play in the fulfillment of God's purpose and intentions for him and all the nations. The first imperative is saying, he must get up and go, and then God will make him into a great nation. The second imperative

is saying when he becomes a blessing, then the Lord will bless those who bless him. So the two imperatives are conditional, for it is when man has done his part, and the Lord has done what He says He will do that the abundant blessing will be realized in Abraham and then extended to all the nations.

Thus, it is important that Abraham responded positively to God's imperatives: "So Abram left, as the LORD had told him." (Genesis 12:4). What we learn from Abraham is that the discipline of obedience is crucial in the fulfilment of God's mission. So, there are two important lessons to learn. First God's mission is founded on God's grace alone. Secondly, human beings have their part to play, namely they are expected to respond in obedience to God at all times and in all places.

### **How Did Abraham Respond to God's Mission? - Abraham Modeled A Seven-fold Spiritual Disciplines**

We shall now turn to a seven-fold spiritual discipline that characterized Abraham's response to God's grace in the process of fulfilling God's mission to the nations, and their relevance for the church's engagement in God's mission today.

#### **1. Growing Strong in Faith**

The first spiritual discipline that Abraham followed is that he grew strong in his faith as he anticipated the fulfilment of God's missional promise. Even in the most challenging situations Abraham maintained his faith in God as Paul tells us in Romans 4: 18-21,

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead - since he was about a hundred years old - and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised".

Again in Hebrews, we are told that Abraham's obedience to God is an expression of his strong faith in God.



By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:8-10).

The great legacy that Abraham gives to all Christians, especially to all missionaries, is that they must have personal faith in the triune God before they go to the nations, for this is what Abraham did. Of course, having a personal faith in God did not make Abraham an extraordinary person. There were times that he lived with uncertainty and doubt regarding the fulfilment of the Promise (Genesis 15:1-5; see also Genesis 16:1-15). However, In the midst of doubts, he was convinced that God was faithful to his Promise and that he had to persevere in his faith. The challenging situations made him grow stronger in faith. He persevered to the end. In our commitment to Africa-to-Africa mission, or Africa-to-Europe/Asia missions we should grow in faith as we face challenging situations, for without faith we cannot please God.

## **2. Practicing Hospitality**

Hospitality has a crucial place in realizing God's mission in the world. When Abraham was a missionary in Canaan, one day he saw three strangers standing nearby. "When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground" (Genesis 18:2). He invited them in, washed their feet and with the help of his wife Sarah and his servants they served the visitors with a delicious meal. Unknown to Abraham, he and his family were extending hospitality to the Lord himself, who had come to them as three strangers (Genesis 18:1-15). Commenting indirectly on Abraham's hospitality the book of Hebrews encourages Christians to practice hospitality as a missional virtue. "Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:1-2).

There are several examples in the Old Testament where people like Joseph, Moses and Solomon extended hospitality to strangers and were blessed by their acts of kindness (Genesis 43:15-34; Exodus 2:15-22; 1 Kings 4:22). In the New Testament our Lord Jesus himself showed hospitality when he lavishly fed over five thousand adults and children (Matthew 14:15-21; Mark 6:35-44; Luke 9:12-17; John 6:4-13). Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is an excellent example of exercising hospitality towards a neighbor (Luke 10:30-37). Jesus continued to extend hospitality towards his disciples after his resurrection when he shared meals with them (John 21:4-13).

Indeed, Christians are expected to show hospitality towards one another, and Paul in his closing greetings to the church in Rome cited Gaius as one whose hospitality he and the whole church had enjoyed (Romans 16:23). We are not only expected to show hospitality towards all Christians, but we should do so within our nuclear and extended families, especially to widows and orphans (1 Timothy 5:1-8).

We must also know that demonstrating hospitality, especially to strangers is a way of showing our faithfulness to the triune God, and that such acts are usually accompanied by blessings from the Lord. Abraham and his wife, Sarah are good example of this, for the Lord blessed them when he said to them, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son" (Genesis 18:10). In the following year Sarah gave birth to Isaac. So Abraham teaches us that hospitality is an important missional responsibility even in our generation.

### **3. Being Disciplined in Prayer**

We learn from Abraham that prayer is an essential discipline in our God-given missional responsibilities. The first example is where Abraham had to passionately intercede for Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:16-33). Abraham had such an intimate relationship with God that when God wanted to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah He shared what was on His heart with Abraham.

When the men got up to leave, they looked down towards Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about

to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him”. (Genesis 18:16-19)

Abraham responded to God by seriously interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah. Although God did not stop destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham’s intercessory prayer had some positive results as indicted in Genesis 18:29, “So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived”. We learn from Abraham’s missional model that a missionary must be an intercessor for the nation’s he or she has been called to serve.

Another occasion that Abraham demonstrated the importance of intercessory prayer was when he had to find a wife for his son Isaac (Genesis 24:1-9, 40-41). In this moving story he asked his oldest servant to place his hand under his thigh and make a vow in the name of the Lord that he will not find a wife for Isaac from the Canaanites (Genesis 24:1-4). By this act, according to Augustine, Abraham was being “prophetic of the fact that the Lord God of heaven and the Lord of the earth would one day come in flesh fashioned from that thigh”<sup>10</sup>

Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, Old Testament II, Genesis 12-50, Edited by Mark Sheridan, General Editor, Thomas C. Oden, Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2002, cited in City of God, 16:33) p.122.

In this story, Abraham prayerfully charged his servant to find the right woman for Isaac. Abraham was convinced that marriage between people who do not share the same faith in Yahweh can jeopardize the fulfilment of the promise to him and for the nations. His servant shared his view and therefore prayed fervently and received immediate response to his request. When Rebekah appeared at the spring to collect water, she fulfilled all that Abraham’s servant had previously asked the Lord to do to enable him to know the right woman for Isaac (Genesis 24:5-61).

It was not only Abraham, and his servant who prayed for the right choice in marriage for Isaac. Isaac himself had gone to Beer Lahai Roi, to prayerfully meditate on the issue under discussion. This is a clear indication that Abraham had taught his household the importance of prayer in seeking God's will in mission. Interestingly, the wedding between Isaac and Rebekah took place in "the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death". (Genesis 24:62-67).

An important lesson is that prayer is an important ingredient in the fulfilment of God's mission. People engaged in God's mission should be intercessors for the nations. At the same time, they should train their family to be prayerful, particularly when it comes to marriage.

#### **4. Acknowledging the Equality of all Persons**

As we journey with Abraham in the process of fulfilling his God's mission among the nations, he offers us a remarkable missional model in his relationships. He knew how to relate respectfully with people of different ethnic groups. He had no quarrel with the Canaanites and the Perizzites when he lived amongst them. Abraham was able to have a peace treaty with Abimelech and Phicol the commander of Abimelech's forces when there was some misunderstanding among them regarding a well that Abraham had previously dug. The peace treaty was so successful that the place where the negotiation took place was called Beersheba, referring to the seven lambs with which Abraham sealed his covenant with Abimelech (Genesis 21:25-32).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Abimelech and Phicol had great respect for Abraham and they openly testified that God was with Abraham in everything he did (Genesis 21:22). This acknowledgement powerfully demonstrates the positive impact that Abraham's witness had on the people among whom he lived.

Another situation that showed Abraham's ability to live amicably with people was how he related with the Hittites, particularly with Ephron after the death of his wife, Sarah. When Sarah died Abraham went to the Hittites and introduced himself as "an alien and a stranger among" them (Genesis 23:4). The Hittites in fact told him that because of the way he had respectfully and humbly lived among them they would give for free the land for the burial of Sarah.

They said to Abraham, “Sir, listen to us. You are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead” (Genesis 23:5-6).

Indeed, Ephron the Hittite who owned the land that Abraham was negotiating for, said to him, “No my lord; listen to me, I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead.” (Genesis 23:11). Abraham refused to take the land for free. After lengthy negotiation, “the field and the cave in it were legally made over to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site.” (Genesis 23:20). Abraham paid ‘four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weight current among the merchants’ (Genesis 23:16).

Abraham’s ability to live in peace with diverse ethnic groups clearly demonstrates he accepted all human beings as equal and treated them as such. Abraham understood that his missional calling and sending to the nations was based on God’s grace, and that all human beings are equal in the sight of God. Therefore, he had to live in peace with all groups of persons. The leaders of the nations among whom he lived and served also recognized him as a man who had the favor of God on him. His faith and character demonstrated the love of God in action. We must all follow Abraham’s exemplary missional model as we participate in God’s mission in the world of the nations.

## **5. Having Right Attitude Towards Wealth**

One of the challenging things in mission is having the right attitudes towards material resources, and being able to manage them in ways that glorify the Lord. Abraham’s attitude towards money and other material possessions is another exemplary model for all people who have committed themselves to do mission in God’s way. There are three occasions that Abraham demonstrated right attitude towards possessing and managing wealth.

The first example is how Abraham managed the conflict that occurred between him and his nephew Lot. Abraham was a very rich man, with sheep, goats, and cattle, as well as silver and gold (Genesis 13:2). His nephew, Lot too was rich in sheep, goats, and cattle (Genesis 13:5). Because both of them had too many animals and there were not enough pasture land quarrels broke out between

the men who took care of their animals (Genesis 13:6-7). Abraham showed a real sense of maturity in resolving the deadly conflict. He drew Lot's attention to the fact that they should not allow their material possessions to destroy them. Then he politely reminded his nephew the importance of maintaining good human relationship within the family as a witness to outsiders. Next, although he was older than his nephew, and the one who had the Promise from God, he asked his nephew to make the first choice. "We are relatives, and your men and my men shouldn't be quarrelling. So let's separate. Choose any part of the land you want. You go one way, and I'll go the other." (Genesis 13:9). When Lot saw that the whole land in the Jordan Valley had plenty of water and rich pasture land he chose that place and moved there. Abraham was left with the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, and was richly blessed by the Lord for peacefully resolving the issue (Genesis 13:14-16).

The second incident occurred after Abraham had rescued Lot and his family after they had been captured in a battle (Genesis 14:1-16). After Abraham's victory over Chedorlaomer and the other allied kings, Melchizedek who was king of Salem and also a priest of the Most High God, brought bread and wine to Abraham and blessed him for the victory over his enemies. Abraham responded by giving Melchizedek a tenth of all the loot he had recovered from the defeated allied kings. By doing this Abraham rightly acknowledged that the victory came from the Lord, and that he was grateful to the Lord for the loot (Genesis 14:17-20). Indeed, according to Ambrose. "the fact that Abraham offered tithes to Melchizedek shows that he was humble even in victory."<sup>12</sup>

The third occasion followed immediately after Abraham had attributed the victory to the Lord. The king of Sodom came to Abraham and asked him to take all the loot, but give him back all his people. Abraham firmly rejected any thing that the king of Sodom wanted to give as a reward for the victory the Lord had given him. He wanted to avoid any situation that will make the king of Sodom take credit for the victory. "I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, "I made Abram rich"" (Genesis 14:23). In effect, what Abraham is saying to the king of Sodom, according to Chrysostom

is, “I have on my side the supplier of countless goods; I enjoy much favor from on high. I have no need of wealth from you. I don’t want human resources. I am content with the regard God pays me. I know the generosity of his gifts toward me.”<sup>13</sup> Ambrose’s remarks on this incident is also worth quoting. He writes,

“How remarkable it is, then, that Abraham did not wish to touch any of the spoil gained by his victory or to take even what was offered him? The fact is that to receive recompense diminishes the joy of a victory and blunts the gratuitous character of a favor.. The holy patriarch rightly refuses to appropriate any of the spoil, even if it was offered to him, lest the one who gave it say, “I have made him rich”<sup>14</sup>.

In short, Abraham is not against riches. He was very rich. He accepted that there is a place for material goods when we are engaged in God’s mission. The danger he wants us to avoid is when money and God are put on the same level and both are worshipped as if they are of the same value. Money is a servant and God is the Almighty Master who is over and above all material gains, and that we are accountable to God in how we manage material resources in God’s mission. One of the great challenges in the mission of God is how to acquire and manage material resources that come our way, and this is true today as it was in the time of Abraham.

## **6. Cross-Cultural Sensitivity**

Cross-Cultural sensitivity is required of all missionaries, and Abraham is no exception. In fact, he was so sensitive regarding doing the right thing in a different culture, that he initially took controversial stance that God graciously vindicated him in the end. There are two similar incidences in his missionary career that have posed considerable challenges to biblical interpreters since the patristic period. The main issue concerns Abraham, on two occasions, asking Sarah to introduce herself as his sister, for fear that he might be killed if she is introduced as his wife. The first one happened when he and Sarah had to go to Egypt because there was severe famine where they lived. (Genesis 12:11-13). When they actually arrived in Egypt and Pharaoh’s officials saw that Sarah was a very beautiful woman they took her to the palace and treated Abraham well for her sake. But God intervened and

inflicted serious disease on Pharaoh and his household and Pharaoh had to politely and generously order Abraham and Sarah out of Egypt (Genesis 12:14-20).

The second occasion was when Abraham and Sarah stayed in Gerar, “and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, “She is my sister.” Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her. But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, “You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman.” (Genesis 20:2-3).

To understand and appreciate what is going on in these two incidences one will have to place the episodes in their cultural context in order to understand why Abraham had to take the stance he did. Didymus the Blind, an early African theologian, understood the cultural sensitivity of Abraham and therefore spoke positively of his decision. He writes,

Abraham made an intelligent compromise with the lustfulness of the Egyptians, being certain that God, who had made him leave his own country, would watch over his marriage. . In fact, marriage between brother and sister was practiced in Egypt and in his own country, as he said later, “She really is my sister”. It was therefore a clever strategy to suggest to Sarah to say only that at first. As the laws against adultery were probably respected among the Egyptians, Abraham thought in fact that they would kill him in order not to be considered as adulterers”.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar vein, Augustine, who understood the Egyptian culture also insists that Abraham did not lie when he refers to Sarah as his sister when the pressure of famine took them to Egypt.

There he called his wife his sister, and he told no lie. For she was this also, because she was near of blood; just as Lot, on account of the same nearness, being his brother’s son, is called his brother. Now he did not deny that she was his wife but held his peace about it, committing to God the defender of his wife’s chastity and providing as a man against human wiles. If he had not provided against the danger as much as he could, he would have been tempting God rather than trusting in him.<sup>16</sup>



Thus, Didymus the Blind and Augustine, interpreting the incident in its Egyptian cultural context see Abraham's position as an intelligent strategic compromise that later worked favorably for the Egyptians and Abraham.

For Chrysostom, the story of Abimelech was a great opportunity to highlight the importance of Abraham. The incident made Abraham very popular. He writes, "The fear of the people and the indignation of Abimelech provide an opportunity for emphasizing the importance of Abraham, who supposedly had been treated as of no account. The threats against Abimelech also serve to underline the importance of keeping God uppermost in mind and having regard for justice".<sup>17</sup> The fact that in both cases God did not condemn Abraham's stance but defended him and openly blessed him means God accepted the position he took in the two culturally sensitive situations.

## **7. Being Constantly Attentive to Worship**

The discipline of worship had an important place in Abraham's missional activities. This is expressed in many occasions in his missional journey by constantly and deliberately building altars and calling on the name of the LORD. The ultimate goal of God's mission is worship, and that was exactly what Abraham did. When in obedience to God he left Haran and he arrived at Schechem, the first thing he did was to "build an altar there to the LORD" (Genesis 12:7). Again, when later he pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east, "he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD" (Genesis 12:8).

When Abraham and his household returned from Egypt he went back to an area near Bethel where he had previously built an altar, and "there Abram called on the name of the LORD" (Genesis 13:3). After Lot had chosen the fertile land, and Abraham had settled for the land of Canaan, and the LORD had blessed him, he "went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the LORD" (Genesis 13:18). After Abraham had defeated Kedorlaomer and his allied kings in the battle, Melchizedek, king of Salem, the Priest of the Most High blessed Abraham. Abraham appropriately,

responded by giving a tenth of everything to Melchizedek as an act of worship for the victory God won for him (Genesis 14:20). Again, Abraham understood the sacrifice of his son Isaac as worship when he said to his servants on the third day in their journey, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. *We will worship and then we will come back to you.*” (Genesis 22:5, emphasis mine).

From what we have listed above we are right in agreeing with Chrysostom that Abraham “was constantly attentive to divine worship”,<sup>18</sup> and so must we as we engage in God’s mission. The climax of God’s mission is the sincere act of worship of the Triune God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is what we find in Revelation where people from every nation, tribe, people and language stand before the throne of the Lamb and worship God unceasingly (Revelation 7:9-17). In sum, Abraham’s missional model of climaxing all occurrences in his life with worship is worth emulating, for that is the ultimate goal of the mission of God!

### **Conclusion**

Abraham’s life and character reflected the grace of God that he himself had experienced in God. He was wise, brave, and skillful in diplomacy. Indeed, he offers our generation a relevant missional model founded on God’s grace that challenges us to develop spiritual disciplines that will enable us to fulfill God’s mission anytime and anyplace in the world.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of Go: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2006), p. 198.
- <sup>2</sup> *Africa Bible Commentary*, General Editor, Tokumboh Adeyemo, (Nairobi, Kenya: WorldAlive Publishers, Zondervan Corporation, 2006), p.16.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture*, Genesis 1-11, Edited by Andrew Louth, General Editor, Thomas C. Oden, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2001), p. 174.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.171.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 171.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 175.
- <sup>7</sup> *Tertullian's Defense of Christians Against the Heathen, Apologeticum, chapter 50*. Translated by Alexander Souter. [www.tertullians.org/articlesmayor\\_apologeticum\\_07translation.htm](http://www.tertullians.org/articlesmayor_apologeticum_07translation.htm).
- <sup>8</sup> David J. Bosch, *Witness To The World, The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, First published in 1980), p. 54.
- <sup>9</sup> The Methodist Hymn-Book, numbered 77 verse 2 (England: The Methodist Publishing House, Copyright, December 1933).
- <sup>10</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, Old Testament II, Genesis 12-50*, Edited by Mark Sheridan, General Editor, Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2002, cited in City of God, 16:33), p.122.
- <sup>11</sup> Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publications, 1987), p. 133
- <sup>12</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, Old Testament II, Genesis 12-50....*, p. 25.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 28.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.29.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 7.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 8.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 86.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 12.