

THE   
PRESENT  
WORD   
ADULT BIBLE LESSONS

PARTICIPANT'S BOOK

FALL 2024

WORSHIP IN THE COVENANT COMMUNITY



# ABRAM BUILDS AN ALTAR AT MAMRE

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Genesis 12–13

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

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. (Gen. 13:18)

Daily Bible Readings			
<b>M</b>	Aug. 26	2 Cor. 1:16–24	God’s Promises Are Always Yes
<b>T</b>	Aug. 27	Gen. 12:1–9	A New Life of Obedience
<b>W</b>	Aug. 28	Gen. 12:10–20	Fear Not Faith
<b>Th</b>	Aug. 29	Phil. 4:10–19	God Will Fully Satisfy Your Needs
<b>F</b>	Aug. 30	Col. 2:6–12	Walk in Christ with Thanksgiving
<b>Sa</b>	Aug. 31	Ps. 16	God Gives a Goodly Heritage

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

As we begin this study, reflecting upon Genesis themes and threshold moments, I am reminded that Genesis is replete with both beginnings and endings. Genesis is a tapestry of narratives that lead us into important conversations about humanity’s intricate relationship with God. These stories are at times joyful, while other times they are fraught with tension and consequence. These beginnings and endings force readers to contemplate the complexities of human nature, the consequences of our choices, and the continuous nature of our journeys of faith.

When we think about the threshold opportunities in our own lives, the story of Abram reminds us that God’s initiating grace is what sets each new story of faithful response in motion. Through the often unrecorded and sometimes plainly stated witness of the family of Abram, readers encounter conflicts and resolutions, blessings and struggles, as well as a constant, underlying pursuit of reconciliation and peace. Each beginning and ending within the story of the community of Abram and Sarai invites us to contemplate the implications of our own choices and the possibilities that lie ahead.

Our stories are not limited to the endings we encounter. Instead, our stories continue to take shape through our responses to the threshold moments we experience, returning us again and again to the grace of God that makes every story new.

As we dive into the stories of the family of Abram, let's remember that our journeys of faith are not about reaching specific destinations but about attending to the abundance and love of God. As we draw inspiration from the individuals within Genesis who embraced God's initiating grace, may we also respond with generosity, reconciliation, and a willingness to start anew.

*Blessing and Reconciling God, remind us of your grace, of the joy that we can experience in your teaching, and of the surprising moments, when your favor comes to us as a bolt from the blue, leading us into new experiences that you will show us. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

Genesis 13:8–18

**13:8** Then Abram said to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me and between your herders and my herders, for we are kindred. <sup>9</sup>Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.” <sup>10</sup>Lot looked about him and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. <sup>11</sup>So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward, and they separated from each other. <sup>12</sup>Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the plain and moved his tent as far as Sodom. <sup>13</sup>Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD.

<sup>14</sup>The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, <sup>15</sup>for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. <sup>16</sup>I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. <sup>17</sup>Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.” <sup>18</sup>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.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

## A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

**A**bram builds altars to mark occasions on which God calls him to greater faithfulness. The traditions of Genesis describe Abram as encountering moments of divine grace that initiate new beginnings and transformative relationships with God. These encounters are unexpected, unearned, and yet shape the whole family of Abram. A reader can interact with how Abram navigated conflict and cultivated a generous spirit.

A Hebrew Bible scholar says that, through Abram, God begins anew with humanity. It isn't that God does this because Abram earned it. Neither is Abram distinguished from his peers in any way. God initiates this journey for Abram's family with Abram, just another guy, living in his ancestral home. Out of the blue, God says, "Move." Jon Levenson says that God's grace comes to Abram like a "bolt from the blue."<sup>1</sup> What distinguishes him is that he *responds* and so launches a new chapter for humanity.

Tradition draws a contrast between Abram's generous response and the seemingly antithetical response of Lot. But instead of culminating in a fierce fight, Genesis portrays the blessings of reconciliation (Gen. 13:14–17). God responds to Abram's actions by affirming his choice and assuring him of abundant blessings. The story connects reconciliation and peace with God's favor.

Abram's encounter with God's initiating grace summons readers to consider the ways connections with God are founded on what God does first, not because one has earned it, but because God's favor and grace are the foundation of every community of faith. From some of the others mentioned and those who were perhaps present but not mentioned, it is clear that this whole story carries depth of meaning for all who were connected with Abram's moves and responses to God. Sarai, for example, moved with Abram. The text doesn't indicate whether she approved or not. The text doesn't say that she was at all consulted, though it's easy to imagine that, without Sarai's own faithful response, events would not have unfolded as they did. The story of Abram is really the story of a community of faith.

1. Jon D. Levenson, "Genesis" in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press 2014), 27–30.



**What threshold events in your life help you to empathize with the experiences of Abram or Sarai?**



**How would you describe the experience of a family, community, or church that shares a commitment to the peaceful resolution of a dispute?**

## GRACE BEGINS ANEW

Through Abram, God begins anew with humanity. As discussed previously, God doesn't do this because Abram is portrayed as having earned God's favor in any particular way or as being anything special with respect to his peers. The only thing that distinguishes Abram, at the beginning of Genesis 12, is that God, out of God's own grace, speaks to Abram, initiating something completely new, and Abram responds to that grace, starting a new trajectory for humanity in relationship to God.

A bolt from the blue might be exactly the way Sarai experienced the news from Abram. Some might argue Sarai would have expected she would need to go along with whatever surprises might come. But the story would have no interest if such a move was just another expected thing in the life of the time. As people, we often desire to have stability, and the changes that take place in Sarai's life are not changes that support stability.

God does not manufacture stressful changes in the lives of Sarai and Abram for the sake of the stressing them out in order to break them down. God says, "Go . . . to the land that I will show you. . . . and I will bless you . . . so that you will be a blessing" (12:1). The Genesis writer doesn't offer anything about the conversation God had with Sarai or any other members of the family, but, as we know from later in the story, God's grace is with Sarai too. Speaking of Sarai, God says, "I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations" (Gen 17:16).

This study makes no attempt to rationalize or justify the wrongheaded, evil practice of enslaving people, regardless of the manner or context in which it was done. While biblical texts capture the reality of human practices, they do not always highlight the essence of God's image of freedom as the likeness in which all people are created. Having said that, this study trusts that a biblical text, even when it depicts cultural practices that must be rejected, invites us into life-giving conversations. The resolution in this story is that God promised prosperity and blessing. Abram, who is understood to represent everyone who was with him, moved his tent and settled by the oaks of Mamre. There Abram built an altar to the Lord (Gen. 13:18).



**The story describes Abram building altars as markers of his spiritual growth in relationship to God. How might you mark the waypoints of your spiritual maturity, using markers of time and space as essential reminders of God-filled moments?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

As we move from the ancient world of Sarai and Abram, we're invited to consider the timing of when this lesson is scheduled: Labor Day Weekend. The holiday recognizes the American labor movement, including efforts to improve working conditions and wages for those who suffered under unsustainable employment practices. Organized labor groups recognized that, for centuries, the milieu and history of American labor included enslavement, low-or-no-paying apprenticeship, indentured servitude, sharecropping, and harsh factory-working conditions. The groups that struggled against these conditions often found themselves in heated conflicts with employers and industrial leaders. Labor Day commemorates the efforts of all those who struggled to improve working conditions in the United States.

It isn't a religious holiday, though congregations often incorporate honoring Labor Day in the worship service. Certainly, it's appropriate to consider God's presence in the American labor movement. God was working in and through organized labor groups to move out of the circumstances laborers were experiencing. Though labor organizers may not always have been aware of it, their actions were a response to God's yearning for shalom for all, calling them to move from generations of dehumanizing practices of harsh labor into a new moment with the promise God would bless them.

We honor the laborers who may not have the protections of organized labor or even the protection of employment law because they are gig workers. Maybe you, as a laborer, are one of those being honored this weekend. Maybe you, as an employer, experience a challenging economy, historical practices, and the concerns of the people you employ.

While the details of God's summons may vary, the collective call that we can draw from the story of Sarai and Abram is to receive and respond to God's grace, which can come as a bolt from the blue. God's grace doesn't come because we deserve it or have done anything to earn it. That wasn't the case for Abram or for us. Let us receive and respond to God's grace. Let us also commemorate those moments for ourselves and future generations, so that we will always have reminders of the grace God gives.



**Where do we see a commitment to peaceful resolution to a dispute? How might that commitment be memorialized as a threshold for resolution?**

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes from the Church Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.*

1. Pastoral nomadism was common in the ancient Near East. The provision for the health of Abram's and Lot's herds determined their prospects for survival. Given the scarcity of grazing land and water sources, tempers were short. There were limits as to the size of herds that the land could support.
2. In deferring to Lot, Abram is on the verge of giving away the Promised Land. But Lot "chose" to go "east." Abram remained in the land, securing God's promise. Lot became the father of the Ammonites and the Moabites (19:37–38), who proved to be obstacles to Israel's faithfulness (Deut. 23:3–6; Ezra 9:1).
3. The Hebrew word for *altar* is *mizbeah* ("to slaughter"); Greek *thusiasterion* ("a place of sacrifice"). Altars are places of exchange, communication, and influence. In the patriarchal period, altars were markers of place, commemorating an encounter with God (Gen. 12:7) or physical signs of habitation. The altar built by Abram near Hebron was located close to those mentioned in 12:6–8, in what would later be the central regions of Israel and Judah.
4. Mamre refers to an Amorite who resided near Hebron (Gen. 14:13, 24). He owned the place known as "the oaks of Mamre the Amorite" (14:13).