



SEASONS OF OUR LIVES

FROM HOME TO HOME

Finding Meaning in Mobility

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Contents

Introduction 4

Mobility and Vocation 6

Mobility and Family 19

Mobility and Relationships 34

Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session

in order to adequately work through each of the chapters.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume on the topic of mobility is one of several volumes that explore **Seasons of Our Lives**. While the Scriptures remain constant, we have the opportunity to find within them a fresh message as we go through life facing various challenges. Whether the circumstances in our lives change due to our own decisions or due to the natural process of aging and maturing, we bring with us the actual lived experiences of this world to our prayerful reading of the Bible. This series provides an opportunity to acknowledge our own circumstances and to find how God continues to work in us through changing times.

Mobility and Vocation



Begin by quietly asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read Genesis 11:31–12:9, one of the early stories of God’s calling forth people to move to the unknown.

Genesis 11:31–12:9

³¹Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and brought them out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to go to the land of Canaan. But when they reached Haran, they settled there.

³²The lifetime of Terah was two hundred and five years; then Terah died in Haran.

¹The LORD said to Abram: Go forth from your land, your relatives, and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

³I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the families of the earth will find blessing in you.

⁴Abram went as the LORD directed him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. ⁵Abram took his wife Sarai, his brother's son Lot, all the possessions that they had accumulated, and the persons they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land as far as the sacred place at Shechem, by the oak of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.

⁷The LORD appeared to Abram and said: To your descendants I will give this land. So Abram built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. ⁸From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel, pitching his tent with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east. He built an altar there to the LORD and invoked the LORD by name. ⁹Then Abram journeyed on by stages to the Negeb.

Following a few moments of quiet reflection on the passage, consider the background information provided in "Setting the Scene."

Setting the Scene

The experience of moving, or moving again and again, can have a profound impact on one's sense of identity. For some, it may be difficult to see beyond the immediate transitions and the reasons for them and to discern a larger arc to one's life. Reflecting on the ancient story of Abram and Sarai can help people today see our own experiences of geographic mobility as

graced and formative dimensions of our life stories. Moreover, through the story of Abram and Sarai (later known as Abraham and Sarah), we might consider how our stories of mobility are sacred vocation stories, with significance beyond our own lives, woven into God's story of creation and care for the entire human family.

This passage comes shortly after a group of stories in the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis, which are narrative reflections on the origins and identity of humanity in general. These include the well-known accounts of creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. Now, we are introduced to the origins and identity of Israel in particular through its various patriarchs and ancestors. In this first introduction to Abram and Sarai, we already begin to see that Israel's story is one of mobility.

Indeed, some of the earliest hearers of this story encountered it out of their own experience of mobility, during and after the time of the Babylonian exile (597–538 BCE), when much of the Judean population was forced to leave their land in the wake of the fall of Jerusalem (587). It was during and after the exile that these stories in Genesis and in the wider Pentateuch (the Bible's first five books) were edited and collected. It was a time of questioning and uncertainty about national identity. Our ancestors in faith found meaning for themselves in Abram and Sarai's mobility and so can we.

The passage from Genesis 11:31–12:9 will be considered a few verses at a time. The questions that appear occasionally in the margins are for group discussion or personal reflection.

Understanding the Scene Itself

³¹Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and brought them out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to go to the land of Canaan. But when they reached Haran, they settled there. ³²The lifetime of Terah was two hundred and five years; then Terah died in Haran.

For Abram, the city of Haran and its surrounding region is an important place in his life story. In some ways, this city in northern Mesopotamia is an unexpected home, the result of Abram's father Terah's uprooting his family (including Abram and his wife Sarai) from his native land in Ur, in southern Mesopotamia. Terah's intention in leaving Ur seems to have been to travel to Canaan, but for some reason the family settles in Haran. Abram and Sarai will eventually make the trip down to Canaan after Terah's death but, in the meantime, the lengthy settlement in Haran has an important formative



impact—not only on Abram and Sarai, but on their eventual family.

For Abram and his family, Haran is not their initial homeland, but it will continue to be a place that grounds their identity, even after that identity shifts to the new land of Canaan. Years later, we will hear how Abram insists on following the ancient practice of endogamy (arranging marriages within one's own tribe) by procuring his son Isaac's wife (Rebekah) from his family in the same region surrounding Haran, in nearby Nahor (Gen 24:3, 10). Likewise, Isaac's wife, Rebekah, will encourage Isaac to send *their* son, Jacob, to Haran, ostensibly to procure wives, which he does in Leah and Rachel (Gen 27:43; 28:10).

In the face of mobility, we too may find ourselves returning to the places that formed us, even if only in our hearts. Our homelands have shaped us, and may continue to capture our imaginations, in various ways. Often, our places of origin formed us through their geography: the mountains that surrounded us, the rivers that meandered through our lives, the plains that expanded our vision. Ultimately, though, places form us not only through environment, but through a wider ecology that includes community practices, memories, cultures, institutions, networks, and stories. Even if our homeland's life patterns are much different than those of patriarchal marriage customs, they have no less a hold on us—no matter where our lives may take us.

¹The LORD said to Abram: Go forth from your land, your relatives, and from your father's house

Name and reflect on the place(s) that formed you in your childhood or youth: How were you shaped by their geography, cultures, institutions, or pace of life?

What do you miss about your early homeplaces? Do they continue to shape your imagination?

to a land that I will show you.²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.³I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the families of the earth will find blessing in you.

One of the significant aspects of the Abram story is God's intimate involvement in companionship with him through his mobility. God's companionship begins with his call to Abram here, and continues in subsequent promises (e.g., Gen 15; Gen 18; Gen 22). But lest we think that intimacy always means comfort, we are struck by the deeply disturbing nature of God's call to Abram, "Go forth from your land" (v. 1), which would seem to be unwelcome to someone who had been settled in Haran for some time.

As we have seen, Abram's identity was deeply connected to the region of Haran and his family that lived there—and would continue to be even after his departure. And yet, God calls him to "go forth" from his homeland to a new land. For those who live mobility today, the experience of moving to new places may be just as unsettling and identity-rattling, whether it is mixed with excitement, fear, or despair. Abram would hardly be encouraged by the first of the promises that follow: to make of Abram a "great nation" (v. 2). After all, one of the important points of the genealogy that precedes this account (Gen 11:30) is that Abram's wife, Sarai, is barren. How can God fulfill this promise?

What words or phrases would you use to describe "going forth" from home or another place that was important to you?

Called by God
Called as we are
Called from
a place or
situation

If you have moved, did you feel ready to move to a new place? Can you look back now and see that “God called you as you were”?

How is Abram to make sense of this call and his impending mobility?

In *The Stories We Live*, theologian Kathleen Cahalan describes vocation in ways that might resonate with both Abram’s initial call and how we experience mobility today. Cahalan suggests that vocation is multidimensional, and she describes these various dimensions of vocation through a series of prepositions. For example, Cahalan notes that we are called *by* God in multiple ways, *as* we are,

and *from* our particular places and situations. In Abram, we can recognize such an experience that leaves room for human action and creativity on Abram’s part. Likewise, Abram is called *as* he and Sarai *are*—even if her barrenness might seem counterintuitive to God’s promise for a great nation. Finally, and most harrowingly, God calls Abram to go forth *from* the land that has given him an identity. “To be called *from* entails moving away, an ending, before a new beginning is clear. . . . It requires you to trust that moving away is the right path, a calling, even though you do not know the destination” (Cahalan, *The Stories We Live: Finding God’s Calling All around Us*). Embracing this sense of vocation may help us live mobility today with *faith* that God really does call us as we are, from one place to an uncertain future, but also with *hope* about the possibilities for our future journeying—that vocation

involves both God's companionship as well as freedom for our creativity.

Moreover, the promises made to Abram in this passage suggest that an embrace of mobility in his vocation would be a blessing not only for him and his family, but would have implications for others: that God would return the blessings and curses heaped on Abram by others and that "all the families of the earth" would find blessing in him (v. 3). Such promises reflect Abram's rootedness in the wider human story, as previously noted, and may also reflect later interactions as he made his move through Canaan (Gen 14:18; Gen 20:7, 17). In any case, for those living mobility today, we might recognize a challenge to be attentive to others as we move from known to unknown places, recognizing God's intimate presence in others' lives as well as our own. We might also reflect on the impact our mobility can have on the lives of others, as we will continue to explore in the next section.

⁴Abram went as the LORD directed him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. ⁵Abram took his wife Sarai, his brother's son Lot, all the possessions that they had accumulated, and the persons they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan.

In this first encounter with God, Abram responds without hesitation to the path placed before him. In later encounters, Abram and Sarai will respond with incredulity and even laughter

How has your experience of mobility had a positive impact on someone else's life?

What have you "accumulated" from past places where you have lived? What experiences, memories, or skills do you continue to value today?

to God's continued promise of progeny (Gen 15; Gen 18). But here, directed to leave his land, Abram does so without question or response. Just as Noah had earlier responded to his vocation to build an ark in service of humanity's future (Gen 6:14-22), so too Abram responds to his vocation of mobility and in so doing provides hope for humanity's continued journeying. We might consider how our acceptance of mobility is also an act of faith that God works through us, wherever we might go.

Abram does not leave his land empty-handed, for he and Sarai bring with them all the possessions and people he has accumulated in Haran (v. 5). This passage depicts him as a wealthy man, who has found great success in Haran—and yet is willing to depart anyway. Perhaps this is one of the greatest challenges of mobility, to leave behind places that have been quite fruitful for us—whether that fruitfulness is in wealth or, as is often the case, friendships and experiences, career skills and competencies. Like Abram, we carry as much of what we have accumulated as we can in our move to the next place.

When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land as far as the sacred place at Shechem, by the oak of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.

⁷The LORD appeared to Abram and said: To your descendants I will give this land. So Abram built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. ⁸From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel, pitching his tent with

Bethel to the west and Ai to the east. He built an altar there to the LORD and invoked the LORD by name. ⁹Then Abram journeyed on by stages to the Negeb.

As Abram enters into Canaan, it is clear that his journeying is not complete, for he moves through Canaan, with stops in Shechem (v. 6), the region around Bethel (v. 8), and then continuing south by stages to the Negeb (v. 9). This presages the chapters to come that will chronicle Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob's continuing mobility throughout Canaan, Egypt, and Haran (Gen 12–37), as well as Israel's continued migration into and then bondage in Egypt (Gen 37–50; Exod 1–12), the dramatic climax of its exodus of Egypt (Exod 13–15), and the stories of migration back to Canaan in the biblical books that follow. In the contemporary world as well, moving is often experienced as an ongoing process of planning, packing, making various arrangements, traveling, unpacking (or not unpacking!). Sometimes it seems, like Abram, we are never quite “settled”!

As Abram moves about this new land, his process includes discovering its particular features and their significance to the local people. Thus, in the city of Shechem he discovers the oak of Moreh that, like many natural features in the ancient world, is



imbued with sacred significance and recognized as a shrine (v. 6). This recognition is an example of the distinction that many have made between “place” and “space.” In today’s globalized world, the particular flavor of local *places* has sometimes given way to a “flattening” of *space*, to the extent that our spaces (malls, office buildings, even churches) may not provide any sense of locality. Abram’s experience in Shechem can be a reminder to reflect on the particular stories and significance of the new places we inhabit in our mobility, taking time to discover local historical sites and buildings, neighborhoods and their backstories, culinary habits and community practices.

What are the buildings, stories, or customs you have found significant in new places?

And yet, Abram also retains his own practices and values, even as he explores this new place. While the shrine at Shechem may have its own particular history and meaning, his encounter of God there (v. 7) is nevertheless shaped by his *own* narrative, his own past experiences with God. At this new sacred place, as in his homeland in Haran, he recognizes again that his vocation will include the gift of land and descendants. His building of an altar in this place, as well as in the hill country outside Bethel (v. 8), is a recognition that both God’s presence and Abram’s vocation endure in this new land. Abram is marking this new place as holy for him, where he can live the identity formed in him from his homeland and yet also be open to how that identity will be colored, stretched, and transformed in this new land.

In *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann writes that “place is space in which important words have been spoken which have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny.” Sometimes, we may seem like an outsider in our new places, just as Abram camped just outside Bethel. Nevertheless, Abram’s story can encourage us to be “at home” with our mobility, attentive to God’s presence and the shaping of our vocation and identity, in sometimes surprising ways and in unlikely places.

How has your identify and vocation been shaped because of your mobility, in new places or surprising ways?

Praying the Word / Sacred Reading

Formed and shaped from dirt and water,
Forged in love from earth’s debris.
God’s own life now flowing through us,
God’s own breath our energy.
Life and death can never stain us,
Through the ash, God’s love we see.

Formed and fed by bread from heaven,
Fed, sustained by hearty Word.
Ever-present in our wanderings,
God now tasted, seen, and heard.
Life renewed, transformed, transfigured,
Mission’s hope, a world restored.

(Prayers in this volume are adapted or taken from
faithshape.org, the website of Justin Huyck.)

Living the Word

- *As we discover our vocations in the midst of mobility, it is important to develop spiritual practices that can help us reflect on God's continuing presence and companionship. Consider attending a retreat, perhaps rooted in the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola, designed to help you reflect on your life's journey. Some retreat centers (and parishes) also have a labyrinth on site—a wonderful way to “walk” your prayer. (To find a labyrinth, go to labyrinthlocator.com.)*
- *Follow Abram's example of traveling through the land by getting to know your new home: subscribe to the local newspaper, visit its various neighborhoods, go for a hike in nearby parks and recreational areas, inquire about shrines or religious centers that celebrate local religious history (e.g., those related to local saints, leaders, or events).*
- *Encounter the diversity of your community by participating in service projects. Check with your parish or local agencies, including community centers for youth, homeless shelters, or hunger organizations. Seek out those that are not in your neighborhood: This is a great way to make a difference, and to learn more about your new home.*