

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver St.  
Flagstaff, AZ 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## THE GOD OF HISTORY AND YOU

Genesis 11:10-32

By

Steven J. Cole

June 2, 1996

Copyright, 1996

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from  
The New American Standard Bible,  
Copyright, The Lockman Foundation

June 2, 1996  
Genesis Lesson 24

## The God of History and You Genesis 11:10-32

History was never my favorite course in college. It seemed like it just involved memorizing a bunch of irrelevant names and dates and facts so that I could spit them back on the test. What was the point?

But then I took church history at Dallas Seminary with Dr. John Hannah. He was able to take the various men and ideas and events from the past and show how it all explains where we're at in the present. His courses gave me a lot of understanding not only about where American Christianity is at, but also about the various men and ideas that had shaped my thinking, even though I had not previously known where they were at on the theological spectrum. And, he also helped open my eyes to other great men of God who, since then, have greatly shaped my life as I have studied their lives and writings.

Someone has said that history is actually "His story"--God's story--because He is sovereignly moving men and nations according to His purposes. Thus it is important to understand history, especially biblical history, because it helps us understand what God is doing and how our lives can fit into His purpose.

I must admit that our text, which traces the genealogy from Shem to Abraham, doesn't make for the most exciting reading. We may wonder why God takes up the pages of Scripture with this kind of thing. But the point of the text is to show us that God is the God of history who is working out His eternal plan through the lives of His people. His movements sometimes seem slow by our standards. But He is steadily at work. And this God of history is our God. He has called us to Himself and will use us in His eternal plan. Knowing this gives meaning to our lives. So our text shows that ...

God is steadily moving in history  
to accomplish His plan of salvation.

As I said in our first study, Genesis is divided in the Hebrew text by the word *toledot*, translated “generations” or “history.” The last section began in 6:9, with the generations of Noah. Genesis 11:10 begins the section dealing with the generations of Shem; 11:27 begins a section which runs through 25:11, dealing with the generations of Terah, the father of Abraham, or Abram, as he was first named.

Abraham is the central figure of Genesis. In fact, apart from Jesus Christ, it could be argued that he is the most important figure in the Bible. While 11 chapters in Genesis cover the period from creation to Abraham (at least 2,000 years), 14 chapters are devoted to the life of Abraham. He is the father of all believers. In several places the New Testament uses Abraham as the prime example to explain the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith apart from works. God often refers to Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Abraham stands as the father of the Jewish nation, directly in the ancestry of Jesus Christ. He even holds an important place in heaven, which Jesus referred to as “Abraham’s bosom” (Luke 16:22). Our text gives us the lineage from Shem to this important biblical figure, Abraham.

What can we learn from this genealogy? Three factors are seen here in how God is at work in history to accomplish His plan of salvation:

1. God’s plan of salvation in history involves His choice.

A narrowing process is at work here. Chapter 10 lists the three sons of Noah. God chose Shem as the line through which He would bring blessing to the world. Of Shem’s five sons (10:22), God chose Arpachshad. In each case we read, “he had other sons and daughters,” but only one of those offspring was chosen in the ancestry leading from Noah through Shem to Abraham and eventually to Christ. God’s choice lies behind the history.

You may wonder why God chooses certain individuals. Maybe He looked down through history and saw somebody who would have faith or live a decent life, and said, “There’s My man! I’ll choose him.” But that isn’t the way it works.

- A. God’s choice is according to grace, not merit.

We don't know much about most of Shem's descendants listed here. But we do know something about Terah, Abraham's father, and a few generations before him. In Joshua 24:2 the Lord says, "From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods" (also Josh. 24:14-15). Abraham came from a pagan family, and was probably an idolater himself when God called him. In fact, even three generations later, when Rachel stole her father's household gods, the family was still into idolatry (Gen. 31:30-35).

God's sovereign choice never depends on human merit. He didn't look down from heaven and say, "There's a good man; I'll choose him." Rather, God only chooses and calls sinners to Himself. Abraham was a sinner. God chose him simply because of grace, apart from anything God foresaw in Abraham. If God chose Abraham because He foresaw that Abraham would believe, then Abraham could boast in his faith as the reason God chose him. But salvation, from start to finish, is all from God, not at all from man.

C. H. Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the past century, was once preaching to a Methodist congregation. During the first part of his sermon, the people were nodding in agreement and saying, "Amen!" and "Hallelujah!" Then Spurgeon came to the doctrine of election and noticed a distinct change in the mood of his audience. (Methodists do not accept that doctrine.) So he proceeded to put it to them this way. He asked, "Is there any difference between you and others who have not been converted?" They responded, "Yes, glory to God! There is a difference." Then Spurgeon asked, "Who has made the difference, yourself or God?" "The Lord," they said. Spurgeon shot back, "Yes, and that is the doctrine of election; that if there be a difference, the Lord made the difference." (*The New Park Street Pulpit* [Baker], 6:138.)

One reason that people don't like this doctrine is that they think that it's not fair of God to choose some and not all. But to contend that God is not fair to show mercy to some and not to others is to usurp God's sovereignty and to impugn His character, as Paul argues in Romans 9. God would be fair if He condemned everyone. All of these men and their descendants had known about God through their ancestor, Noah, and the flood. But, as Paul puts

it in Romans 1:18, they had “suppressed the truth in unrighteousness,” rejecting God’s revelation of His attributes and power through creation. Thus they, not God, were responsible for their spiritual condition. Genesis 10 and 11, which shows us the course of the nations going their own way after the flood, is the Old Testament’s way of saying what Paul says, that God gave them up to their sin; He permitted them to go their own ways (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28; Acts 14:16).

The point is, God didn’t choose Abraham because he was a good man. He chose Abraham to demonstrate His grace. He doesn’t choose anyone because they deserve it. He only chooses sinners who deserve His judgment. And while that’s a blow to our sinful pride, it is actually very good news. It means that you cannot do anything to qualify yourself for God’s salvation. You can only come to God confessing your sin and asking for His mercy, and He will grant it because He is a merciful God. God’s plan of salvation involves His choice according to His grace.

B. God’s choice of a life is what matters.

The thing which separated Abraham from all his contemporaries was that God chose him. It is God’s hand on a life that matters. If God does not choose, if He does not call a person to Himself, you’ve just got human religion. But when God is in it, you’ve got His power unto salvation.

Some people stumble over the doctrine of election. But the heart of election is that *salvation is of God*. He originates it, He moves in our lives before we ever seek Him. So we can take no credit for our salvation; it all comes from Him (see 1 Cor. 1:26-31). That humbles your pride, but it’s a source of great joy and blessing when it dawns on you.

Abraham’s life shows us that God has His hand on a life even before the person is aware of it. He places each person in a particular family. Sometimes, even though that family serves idols, God will take one member and use him to turn the family and even whole nations toward God for generations afterward. Every person who has been used of God will testify that it is God’s choice of him that has made all the difference in his life. Jeremiah the prophet said that God knew him, consecrated him, and appointed

him before he was formed in the womb (Jer. 1:5). Paul said that God set him apart even from his mother's womb (Gal. 1:15). By nature they all were sinners. But by God's grace, they were chosen to know Him and serve Him. That's what mattered.

The apostle Peter commands us, "Be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you" (2 Pet. 1:10). How can we do this? First, have you believed in Christ as Savior and Lord? This is the prime evidence that He has chosen you. You did not believe because of your will (John 1:13). The fallen human will is bound in sin. You believed because God imparted faith to you (Phil 1:29). Then, to your faith, Peter urges you to supply various godly character qualities (2 Pet. 1:5-9). In other words, growth in godliness will help you to be more certain about God's calling and choosing you (1:11). It is a source of great comfort when God reveals to you that He chose you by His grace and that because of His choice your life can be greatly used by Him in His eternal plan of salvation.

## 2. God's plan of salvation in history involves time.

This genealogy shows God's time, both with the nations and with individuals.

### A. God's plan involves time with the nations.

We don't know exactly how much time elapsed from Shem to Abraham. If you add up the totals here, you get about 350 years from the birth of Arpachshad to the birth of Abraham. But it was common in that day, when tracing ancestry, to be selective and to leave gaps. So when it says that Arpachshad lived 35 years and became the father of Shelah (11:12), it may be a direct link; or it may mean that he became the father of an unnamed man who was the ancestor of Shelah. To the Hebrews and others of that time, this was not misleading. It was just a different way of thinking than we're used to. In fact, Luke 3:36 adds Cainan between Arpachshad and Shelah.

But at any rate, there was a fair amount of time between Noah and when God chose Abraham and began to call a people unto Himself. Many people were born and died during those years. The nations spread out over the earth. Most of those nations had strayed from the truth about God. And yet, for reasons known

only to Him, God waited over 350 years until Abraham to issue His covenant to bless all nations through him.

Again, this bothers some people. What about all those people who never heard? They were not without a witness through creation of God's goodness and power (Rom. 1:18; Acts 14:17). As we've seen, they were not innocent people. They suppressed the truth in unrighteousness. But it ought to make us grateful for the fact that we live in a time and place where God has made known His salvation in a clear and definite way. We have God's Word in front of us. We have abundant opportunities to hear His truth preached. What if you had been born in America 500 years ago? God was not moving in this land at that time as He is now. Be thankful that you are privileged to know Him!

B. God's plan involves time with individuals.

We read in Genesis 12:4 that Abraham was 75 when he left Haran for Canaan. Even though people were living longer at that time, he was no youth. Why didn't God call Abraham when he was 20 and give him Isaac when he was 30? I can't answer that question, except to say that God's timing is often not in line with ours. Even after God called Abraham, he grew slowly. God had originally called him when he was in Ur. He got as far as Haran and settled there until his father died (Acts 7:2-4). From God's perspective, that was wasted time. Yet God still used him.

There is a chronological problem I should mention. In 11:32 it says that Terah, Abraham's father, was 205 when he died. Abraham didn't leave Haran until then (Acts 7:4), when he was 75. That would make Terah 130 when Abraham was born. But 11:27 says that when Terah was 70 he became the father of Abraham, Nahor and Haran. The most likely answer is that at 70 Terah had his first son. Abraham is mentioned first in 11:27 because he was the most important son in the story. But Abraham wasn't born until 60 years after his oldest brother. The problem with this solution is that later, Abraham is surprised to learn that he will be a father at 100, which is hard to understand if his own father had been 130 at Abraham's birth. But perhaps with the shortening life spans, Abraham knew at 100 that he was pushing the limit for fathering a child.

But to return to the point, God worked slowly with Abraham. As we'll see in future weeks, after he got to Canaan, he didn't stay, but moved on to Egypt, where he tried to pawn off Sarah as his sister. You know how he later tried to hurry God's promise by fathering a son through Hagar. But in spite of his rough edges, in spite of the time it took, God used Abraham.

That's an encouragement to me. It usually seems like it's taking me so long to learn what God is trying to teach me. I've wasted so much time and gone off on so many side trails. I would despair if I thought it was up to me. But seeing how God worked slowly but surely with Abraham encourages me that there is hope even for me.

So these genealogies teach us that God is steadily moving in history to accomplish His plan of salvation, and that His plan involves His choice and time.

3. God's plan of salvation in history involves individuals.

A. God's plan involved Abraham.

Why not Arpachshad or Terah? We don't know. But we do know that God used Abraham in His plan of salvation in the history of the human race. And Abraham responded to God's call in faith and obedience. He was only one man out of millions on the earth in his day. But his life, obedient to God, made a difference.

An individual life yielded to God's purpose can make a tremendous impact on the course of human events. Perhaps none of us will be used to shape history to the extent that Abraham did. But we can know that God is weaving our lives into the tapestry of history if we are obedient to His call. We may not see the final results even in our lifetime. But we can know that our lives are not in vain if we walk with God.

I enjoyed Edith Schaeffer's, *The Tapestry*, which tells the story of her and Francis and their life together. The title reflects the point that she makes repeatedly throughout the story, that God is weaving the events of our lives into His divine tapestry. We seldom are aware of how He is working at the time. She says that she and Fran did not sit down and plan out their ministry at L'Abri, and how it would have a worldwide impact. Rather they were faithful in

doing what God gave them to do, responding to the opportunities He set before them, and He blessed their ministry.

Even the trials God brings into our lives are part of the tapestry. Often they become the source of His greatest blessings. Verse 30 mentions that Sarah was barren. As you know, that will figure importantly in the story as it unfolds. If you had asked Abraham at this point, he probably would have complained, "I don't understand why God doesn't give us any children." He would especially have complained after God promised to give him more descendants than the sand of the seashore, but he still didn't have any children. But you know how God turned that trial into the greatest blessing in Abraham's life. He often does that with us. We don't understand why He isn't doing things as we would choose. But like Abraham, we must learn to trust Him even when we don't understand.

But God's plan of salvation doesn't just involve famous individuals like Abraham.

B. God's plan involves you.

Even as God's hand was upon Abraham, so His hand is on you. The very fact that you're hearing this message is proof that God has intersected your life, even if you're not yet a believer. Like Abraham at the first, you may still be in Ur of the Chaldees. That is to say, you have not yet come to know God in a personal way. Probably, like Abraham at this stage in his life, you are serving idols, gods of your own making. Perhaps you serve the god of money or success or pleasure. You probably serve the god of self. But today you have heard the living and true God calling your name and saying, "I want you to turn from your sin and to follow Me." If you will say yes to God, like Abraham, your life will never be the same.

Some of you may be at Haran. This was Abraham's half-way station. He began to follow God's call when he left Ur and moved to Haran, several hundred miles closer to Canaan. But he got sidetracked. It took another call from God to get him out of Haran. The call in chapter 12 is probably the second call God issued to Abraham.

Thankfully, God often issues second calls to those He uses in His plan of salvation. God called Moses; Moses blew it by killing the Egyptian and fleeing into the wilderness for 40 years. But God called Moses again. God called Jonah; Jonah took off in the opposite direction. But the word of the Lord came unto Jonah a second time. God called Peter; Peter denied the Lord three times. But the Lord restored Peter with the threefold command, "Feed My sheep." If you've begun to follow the Lord, but you've gotten side-tracked along the way, today He's telling you, "Come on, I want you to go on with Me."

### Conclusion

The important thing is, wherever you're at, to yield yourself to the Lord. A journalist was elected to the world-famous Adventurers' Club. He didn't know the amount of the dues, so he sent in a signed blank check. The Adventurers promptly elected him Adventurer of the Year! God wants you to sign your life over as a blank check to Him. Yes, it's an adventure! But you can trust Him not to take advantage of you. If you will yield your life to Him and walk with Him every day, He will use you in His movement in history to bring about His great plan of salvation for the nations. There is no more significant way to spend your life!

### Discussion Questions

1. How do you answer the charge that election robs man of free will and makes God unfair (see Rom. 9:8-24)?
2. Where is the biblical balance between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man? How can we tell when we're out of balance?
3. The doctrine of God's sovereign election gives me: A. Comfort B. Doubts (Pick one). Discuss.

Copyright 1996, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.