

## Genesis 11:10-32

### The Descendants of Shem and the Book of Terah

**Genesis 11**<sup>10</sup> These are *the records of* the generations of Shem. Shem was one hundred years old, and became the father of Arpachshad two years after the flood; <sup>11</sup> and Shem lived five hundred years after he became the father of Arpachshad, and he had *other* sons and daughters.

<sup>12</sup> Arpachshad lived thirty-five years, and became the father of Shelah; <sup>13</sup> and Arpachshad lived four hundred and three years after he became the father of Shelah, and he had *other* sons and daughters.

<sup>14</sup> Shelah lived thirty years, and became the father of Eber; <sup>15</sup> and Shelah lived four hundred and three years after he became the father of Eber, and he had *other* sons and daughters.

<sup>16</sup> Eber lived thirty-four years, and became the father of Peleg; <sup>17</sup> and Eber lived four hundred and thirty years after he became the father of Peleg, and he had *other* sons and daughters.

<sup>18</sup> Peleg lived thirty years, and became the father of Reu; <sup>19</sup> and Peleg lived two hundred and nine years after he became the father of Reu, and he had *other* sons and daughters.

<sup>20</sup> Reu lived thirty-two years, and became the father of Serug; <sup>21</sup> and Reu lived two hundred and seven years after he became the father of Serug, and he had *other* sons and daughters.

<sup>22</sup> Serug lived thirty years, and became the father of Nahor; <sup>23</sup> and Serug lived two hundred years after he became the father of Nahor, and he had *other* sons and daughters.

<sup>24</sup> Nahor lived twenty-nine years, and became the father of Terah; <sup>25</sup> and Nahor lived one hundred and nineteen years after he became the father of Terah, and he had *other* sons and daughters.

<sup>26</sup> Terah lived seventy years, and became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran.

<sup>27</sup> Now these are *the records of* the generations of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran; and Haran became the father of Lot. <sup>28</sup> Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans.

<sup>29</sup> Abram and Nahor took wives for themselves. The name of Abram's wife was

Sarai; and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. <sup>30</sup> Sarai was barren; she had no child.

<sup>31</sup> Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to enter the land of Canaan; and they went as far as Haran, and settled there. <sup>32</sup> The days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran.

### **Tom Constable provides helpful context...**

- ***"Genesis is moving us progressively from generation (chs. 1-2), to degeneration (chs. 3-11), to regeneration (chs. 12-50)."***
- ***"If the message of Genesis is essentially one of redemption, Genesis 3-11 explains why man needs salvation and what he needs to be saved from."***
- ***"The Babel account (Genesis 11:1-9) is not the end of early Genesis. If it were, the story would conclude on the sad note of human failure. But as with earlier events in Genesis 1-11, God's grace once again supersedes human sin, insuring the continued possibilities of the promissory blessings (Genesis 1:28; Genesis 9:1). . . . The scaffolding of human pride would be dismantled by the erection of the Shemite line that culminates in obedient Abraham, who likewise is found in the region of Shinar. Abraham would prove to be the nations' deliverance."***
- ***"Without the blessing of God the situation of humanity is without hope: that seems to be the chief thrust of the opening chapters of Genesis."***

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### **Introduction...**

“As we come to the final section of Genesis 11, we should reflect on the significance of these opening chapters of the Bible. ***The genealogies of Shem and Terah cover a great gap in history, transitioning Genesis from the primeval eras before and after the flood to the age of the patriarchs, starting with Abraham in Genesis 12. They thus conclude one of the most informative portions of the entire Bible, eleven chapters that are essential to our faith as Christians.***”

**Genesis 1–11** provides *the foundation of a Christian worldview*. We learn that God is the Creator, transcendent above all time and matter, sovereign over all things, and displaying his glory in the goodness of his works.

**Genesis 1–2...shows us man as God's special creation in his own image, placed into a world of God's design**, including the divine institutions of marriage and family....

**Genesis 3...relates the decisive event of the fall that placed our entire race under the curse of guilt and the pain of corruption.**

**Genesis 4–5...relates the great division in humanity between the elect line and the rest of rebellious mankind.**

**Genesis 6–9...shows God's wrath on sin coupled with the grace of God according to his plan of salvation.**

**In Genesis 10–11**, we saw *how the human race rebelled against God at the Tower of Babel, but also how God's will was accomplished in judgment.*

Without the revelation from God in these vital chapters, we would not understand the world in which we are living, much less the ways of God or even our own origin and destiny...

***The pattern established in Genesis 1–11 sets the stage for the rest of the Bible, organized as creation-fall-judgment-redemption.***”

Richard Phillips, Genesis

**Ligon Duncan comments... In this genealogy we focus upon the believing line, the line descended from Shem, down to the line of Abram.** We meet some in this genealogy of chapter 11 who are believing men. And they prepare us for an introduction to a towering figure of Old Testament history...Abraham. ***As we meet Abraham, we meet him not as the Hebrew of Hebrews, the father of faithful, but we meet him as Abram, a pagan from Ur the Chaldeans. And from this line God will forge the future of the race.***”

## **Two Books...of Shem (vss 10-26) and Terah (vss 27-32)...an Election of Grace**

“There are two “books” in this section of Scripture (Genesis 11:10-32)...

First, the book of Shem...in verses 10 through 26.

Second, the book of Terah...in verses 27 through 32.

***First of all, as you see the book of Shem, in verses 10 through 26, what you are seeing recorded there is the election of grace and the fountainhead of the patriarchs.***

***Recall that Noah had predicted that God’s line of blessing would come through Shem. What Moses is reminding us here is the faithfulness of God to that prophecy through Noah.*** Noah had said that God would bless the line of Shem...And sure enough, we are going to see in this passage the line of Shem descended all the way down to Terah, the father of Abram. The line zeroes on a specific aspect of Shem’s line, ignoring other branches that have already been mentioned.

***Davis says this, “Within Genesis 11, there is a marked contrast; on the one hand human rebellion leading to the divine judgment of dispersion.”***

***That’s what we see in Genesis 11, verses 1 through 9.***

***Then when we get to the second half of Genesis 11...we see divine grace leading to the call of Abraham, a call which provided hope for the nations and salvation for the lost.”***

***In this section of Scripture, we see God’s election of grace set forth very clearly.*** Noah had made the prediction in Genesis 9 that the line of blessing would be the line of Shem. This comes to fulfillment before our very eyes here, but it’s all based upon God’s choosing, God’s blessing.

***As you look at the line of Shem listed here, there are idolaters in this line...Abraham’s family are idolaters. They are pagans. And yet God’s election has led to the establishment of a man of faith...a man named Abram, who will leave his family, and leave his country and will go to the land of Canaan, the land of promise. So we see God’s election of grace clearly set forth in the very genealogy as it is recorded.***

***As we consider these lists of men descending from Shem all the way down to Abram, consider the genealogies previously listed for us in the book of Genesis and the folks that aren't listed in this line. Not only are the lines of Japheth and Ham ignored, but some from the lines of Shem who had been listed before are ignored. God's election of grace stands nevertheless.***

Then as we look at verses 27 through 32 we see the book of Terah, the father of Abram. And here again the election of grace is made very clear.

***In this context the election of grace triumphs, even in the presence of idolatry. In fact, Abram is called out of idolatry by the election of grace.***

Ligon Duncan

### **Kent Hughes on The Book of Shem...vss 10-26 (The Genealogy of Father Abraham)**

***“Though humanity had become idolatrous, God's promised blessing on the descendants of Shem (the Semitic peoples) still remained. So Moses here records the genealogy of Shem.***

### **The Genealogies of Genesis 5 and Genesis 11...a study in contrasts**

***Genesis 11 is meant to be a counterpart to the earlier genealogy of Seth in chapter 5,*** which names the ten generations from Adam's son Seth to Noah. In chapter 11 we also have ten generations, extending from Noah's son Shem to Abram.

The two parallel genealogies together record a total of twenty generations from Adam to Abram.

***As you read through this genealogy in Genesis 11, the most notable difference is the absence of the refrain “and he died,” which occurs eight times in chapter 5.*** Genesis 5 stressed that death prevailed in the race, whereas Genesis 11 “stresses a movement away from death toward the promise, and it stresses life and expansion” (Ross).

***The other obvious difference between the genealogies is the shrinking life span of the patriarchs after the flood.*** The 438 years of Arphachsad's life is only about two-thirds of his father Shem's six hundred years. Peleg's 239 years is about half the 464 years of his father Eber. Toward the end of the genealogy Nahor lives some 138 years—so that the predicted shortening of man's life span to 120 years is realized (cf. 6:3).

***Man's sin diminished his longevity. But at the same time, the genealogy testifies to a rising optimism by the deletion of "and he died."...Therefore Shem's genealogy stands as a bridge of hope to a new era.***

### **The Focus on Peleg and not Joktan...**

The midpoint and dividing line of Shem's genealogy is the birth of Peleg in verse 16: "When Eber had lived 34 years, he fathered Peleg." Peleg occupies place number five in the ten generations that run from Shem to Abram—the five generations being Shem, Arpachshad, Shelah, Eber, and Peleg. These five represent a concise recapitulation of Shem's genealogy as it was given in the Table of Nations in 10:21-25, except that there the genealogy also includes Peleg's brother Joktan and his descendants. But ***here in chapter 11 Joktan is not mentioned and Peleg's descendants are listed all the way to Terah and Abram. Why? The answer is that Joktan's line leads up to the fiasco at Babel, while Peleg's line results in the great man Abram, the hope of God's people (cf. 11:17-26). As Kenneth Mathews says, "This highlights the difference in the two inner branches of the Shemite family—one leading to disgrace and the other to grace."***

***Following the confusion of language at the tower of Babel, wave after wave of warriors, shepherds, and builders left the plain of Mesopotamia for the rims of the world...And as they went, they took their Babylonian hearts with them.*** The scattering was by and large a scattering of idolatrous pagans, regardless of whether they were descendants of Shem or Ham or Japheth.

Here and there are some exceptions who maintained the true worship of God—for example, Melchizedek in Canaan and Job in Arabia. But the apostasy was universal, and the spreading waves blanketed the earth with darkness. Babel concluded with the scattered human race estranged from God much as before the flood when the godly Sethite line had been polluted and subsumed by the evil Cainite line.

### **Peleg to Abram**

***The second half of the genealogy, which extends from Peleg through Terah to Abram, places Abram only five generations away from Babel because the tower was built in Peleg's time—"in his days the earth was divided" (10:25). Lastly, the genealogy ends with Terah fathering three sons—Abram, Nahor, and Haran.***

***The genealogy ends just like the ten generations from Adam to Noah ended when Noah fathered three sons—Shem, Ham, and Japheth (cf. 5:32).***

Though Abram, like Shem, was named first in the list over his three brothers, he, like Shem, was not the firstborn. He was named first because of his prominence... Abram means “he is exalted as to his father,” as in noble birth, or more likely “the father ” [i.e., God] is exalted.” Later his name would be changed to Abraham, which as Genesis 17:5 explains means “father of many nations.”

***So we see that hope abounds with the conclusion of this genealogy. Moses has shown that God’s promise to Eve of a seed who will crush the head of the snake (cf. 3:15) could not be thwarted by the confusion and scattering of the nations. Even though the seed was scattered from Babel, God had preserved ten great men from Noah to Abram. And furthermore, the line of Peleg brought grace in place of Joktan’s line of disgrace.***

Kent Hughes, Genesis

### **The Book of Terah...vss 27-32**

“The story of Abraham formally begins not in chapter 12 but in the account of his father, Terah. It opens, “Now these are the generations of Terah” (Gen. 11:27).

Terah, like Adam and Noah, had three sons: “Abram, Nahor, and Haran” (11:26). They lived in “Ur of the Chaldeans” (v. 28), which had become their family home, most likely in southern Mesopotamia. Although Abram is listed first as the most prominent son, it is likely that Haran was born first and that he died “in the presence of his father Terah” (v. 28). Attention is given to the wives of Abram and Nahor, whose names were Sarai and Milcah. We learn that Sarai was Abram’s half-sister (born of a different mother, 20:12) and that Nahor married his niece.

The point of this information is to show us that ***God did not choose Terah’s family because of its godliness. There is abundant information here to suggest that Terah and his sons were idolaters.***”

Rick Phillips, Genesis

### **Kent Hughes on Abram’s family...**

***“Like all families, domestic complications developed, as is implicit in the ‘who married who’ generations of Terah.***

***“Haran fathered Lot,” the nephew who would give Abram so much worry in future years....***

***And we learn two things about Abram’s wife Sarai—first by the extraordinary omission of any information about her being a daughter of Terah and thus the half-sister of Abraham. Moses withholds this information so as not to ruin the suspense in chapter 20 when Abraham, in order to save his own skin, reveals to Abimelech that Sarai is his half-sister. Also, we learn that Sarai was barren—which sets up the huge challenges that would come to Abraham’s faith.*** This challenge of barrenness will occur again for the matriarchs Rebekah and Rachel, and later for the mothers of Samson and Samuel.

***Most important is that we understand that at this time Terah’s tiny, inbred family were moon worshipers residing in the leading center of lunar religion.*** The city was dominated by a massive, three-staged ziggurat built by Ur-Nammu during the beginning of the second millennium B.C.”

Kent Hughes, Genesis

### **Richard Phillips on the Pagan Environment of Abram’s Family...**

***Terah’s adherence to idolatry is seen in the names of his sons’ wives.*** “Sarai,” meaning “princess,” was possibly taken from “Sharratu,” who was the female consort of the moon god. “Milcah” means “queen,” and comes from “Malkatu,” a title for Ishtar, the moon god’s daughter. ***The family was immersed in a culture of idolatry.***

Given this picture, we must not approach the story of Abraham thinking that here is a commendable exception to the corruption of the human race as seen at the Tower of Babel. ***The evidence does not suggest that Abraham was looking to the God of Noah and Shem, trusting in his promise, and looking to his word in hope. Instead, we should picture Terah’s sons as standing on the ziggurat of Ur, gazing into the stars and bowing to the moon.***

Joshua summed up the situation, looking back in later years on Abraham: “Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods” (**Joshua 24:2**).



**When Joshua pointed out Abram's idolatrous past, he wrote to remind the Israelites of their sinful origins. They did not represent a worthy line that was distinguished from the mass of guilty rebels. Rather, God's people are sinners just like the rest of humanity.** Unless God came to them on his own initiative, acting out of an unmerited grace that originates in himself, then Abraham and his family would have remained, as Paul later put it, "strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

**So far as his own sinful nature was concerned, Abram was no more able to contribute to his salvation than his wife, Sarai, was able to bring children from her barren womb.** Far from being disqualified by his sin and unbelief, however, **Abram is presented as ideal material to receive God's saving covenant, precisely because his salvation highlights the free grace that none of us deserve. Abram will be saved in the same way in which all of us may be saved: by God's sovereign grace alone.**"

Richard Phillips, Genesis

**In this passage we see the whole family of Terah leaving Ur of the Chaldeans and making their way to Haran.**

**The final lesson of Terah's genealogy shows that God's grace saves us through a faith that responds to his Word.** Genesis 11:31 tells us that Terah left Ur to travel toward the land of Canaan, taking with him "Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law."

**Lig Duncan comments... "We don't know all the reasons why Terah made the exit from Ur...Perhaps Terah was simply fleeing the destruction of his hometown of Ur.** We know sometime around the year 2000 B.C. the city of Ur was attacked by the Elamites and destroyed. Maybe Terah saw that coming, and he wanted to leave with Abram."

**We do, however, have God's commentary on Abram...**

**In Genesis 12:1, we read that God came to Abram and called him to leave his home for a promised land ahead:** "The LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (Gen. 12:1). **This means that Terah left Ur under the influence of his son Abram, which perhaps accounts for his other son, Nahor, remaining behind.**

**There are other chapters of Scripture which also help us understand exactly what is going on. Consider Acts 7, where Stephen is preaching...**

**Acts 7<sup>2</sup>** And he said, “Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, <sup>3</sup>and said to him, ‘Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.’ <sup>4</sup>Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, *God* had him move to this country in which you are now living.

***Stephen stresses the fact that Abram is not moving for convenience or for any expedience at all. He’s moving because he has felt the call of God to leave his country and relatives and go to the land of promise, the land of Canaan.*** So Abram’s purposes here are very clear, and Stephen comments on them.

This isn’t the last time in the New Testament that his purposes are commented on. In **Hebrews 11:9,10** we are told this by the author of Hebrews:

“By faith he,” that is, Abraham, “lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

***Abram was following a definite call from God, and he was seeking a city which had foundations.***

**Richard Phillips provides helpful Applications...**

***“God’s call for them to leave Ur correlates to his call to all believers to leave behind their former life of sin. Faith in Christ requires a decisive break with our prior allegiances and ungodly practices.*** God later confirmed to Abram, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess” (15:7). ***Both these ideas go together: leaving our former life and its sins and receiving from God new blessings that far outweigh what we have given up.***

***It seems that while Abram received the call from God, he still deferred to his father, Terah, in leading the journey. This is why the family did not immediately proceed to Canaan, where God called them, but settled down halfway there in the region of Haran (Gen. 11:31).***

***In addition to the problem of not ending up where God had sent them, Haran was another center for worship of the moon god, just as Ur had been...***

***It seems that Terah never turned in prayer to the grace of God, so his account concludes, “The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran” (Gen. 11:32).***

***Terah is thus presented as a nominal believer, one who professes to believe but does not possess a changed heart that truly inclines to God. While influenced by God’s word as witnessed by his son, he halfheartedly shuttled from one form of idolatry to another. Terah did not wholly abandon his former way of life.***

***Abram, no longer hampered by his father’s unbelief, finally departed and made the journey to God’s appointed land of Canaan. He was just now learning the ways of faith—a learning process that would continue the rest of his long and blessed life.*** Nancy Guthrie applies Abram’s experience to us: “Like his command to Abraham, God commands us to leave behind what we have found in the world that gives us a sense of security and significance—our plans for our family, our expected inheritance, the convenience of living near family, our familiar culture and established home.” By faith the Lord commands us to follow where he leads and to the salvation that he will graciously give.”

Richard Phillips, Genesis

### **Abraham’s Obedience...**

***Here is the beautiful thing in Genesis: The two greatest persons of primeval and patriarchal times were Noah and Abram—and both were paragons of faith.*** Of Noah, Hebrews says, “By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith” (11:7). Of Abram, Hebrews follows by saying, “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going” (11:8).

***Both men’s faith produced amazing obedience.*** “Noah . . . did all that God commanded him,” the Genesis text emphasizes four times (cf. 6:22; 7:5, 9, 16). Abraham immediately “obeyed” and “went,” says the writer of Hebrews. Thus we see that both men were used to effect salvation for others by their faith.

**Noah's faith wrought salvation for his family and preserved the promise of the seed of Eve. Abram's faith created a people through whom the promise would be fulfilled.**

**And the way Abram's faith began in Ur is the way it continued. Later it was the same faith by which he received his righteousness. Faith does not earn righteousness; it receives righteousness.** Faith is the instrument by which we receive the righteousness that God gives. "He believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).

**May we believe the bare word of God. May we believe so that the promises not present become as present by reason of the sure steadfastness of him who promised them.** May we enjoy the promises now because we believe in God. And because we do, may we obey every word that comes from the mouth of God!"

Kent Hughes, Genesis

**In Conclusion...**

**"You can't get out of Genesis 1 through 11 with a rosy picture of human nature.**

God comes to this man who is of the line of Shem, the blessed line. They had heard the stories that Noah and then Shem had eventually told and passed down. They had heard of the stories of God's destruction of the world and his judgment against wickedness...and yet this family has degenerated into idolatry, moon-god worship.

But out of that line of Shem, out of that family, God is by His election of grace, going to call Abram out of the Ur of the Chaldeans and into the land of Canaan.

**We see a beautiful picture of God rescuing us out of our depravity... You can't say that these were just good people who were just so wonderful that God just couldn't help but love them. These are idolaters. Out of that line of idolaters God plucks Abram like a brand from the fires. And so, he becomes the father of the faithful.**

**It's interesting, isn't it, that the genesis of the line of Terah begins with an exodus, just as God's purposes with the nation of Israel begins with an exodus.** God's purposes with Abram begins with an exodus as the children of Israel came out of Egypt and into the land of Canaan. So Abram would be called out of the land of the Chaldeans and into the land of Canaan.

**What lessons do we learn here? Well, we learn many lessons, but let us focus on two.**

**First of all, we see that serving the living God means forsaking idolatry. And idolatry is not an ancient problem, it is a perennial problem, it is ever present.** And idols come in every form and fashion. You don't have to fall before a statue of gold to be an idolater. **All of us are tempted to capitulate to the thought patterns of our own day, and to begin to think like the world. As we do so we have capitulated to idolatry. But the Lord calls all of us out of idolatry to serve the living and the true God.**

**No doubt one of the reasons that Abram was called away from the land of his birth and away from his family relations was precisely so that God could cut the Gordian knot of idolatry that Abraham was tangled in, and so break him free from the oppression of the thought pattern of that wicked life.**

**Let me also point out that this passage, this chapter reminds us again that our approach into the presence of the Heavenly Father cannot be by our own effort.**

**We see man's wicked efforts at glorification in Genesis 11, verses 1 through 9 in the story of Babel. We see man's feeble efforts at following after God in the story of Terah, making it to Haran, but no further.**

Derek Kidner comments "This chapter brings the primeval history to a doubly appropriate close with man's self-effort issuing in confusion at Babel and in compromise here. On his own, man will get no further than this."

It's the election of grace that brings Abram into Canaan. It's the election of grace which causes the line of Abram to become the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and Joseph. **For those to persevere in the faith, it's not something in them. They are called out of idolatry, and they become the line of the faithful.**

**What's the difference between Abram and his father? The grace of God. Isn't this a glorious picture that gives you hope?** You know, so often we look at folks and the situations that they find themselves in and the background that they find themselves in and we say you know there's no way that they're ever going to be extracted from that mess. And then we look right back to

Genesis 11, and we say look who it is that God has called to be the father of His people, the father of you, the father of the faithful. Look who God has called.

***And one thing that tells us, friends, is that as believers we are not in a position to look down on anyone else. Look where we've come from. Look where God has brought us from. God desires us to seek and to save that which is lost because apart from His grace, there we go.***

Here's Abram, father of the faithful, a moon-worshiping pagan idolater changed, transformed by the grace of God, by the call of God. And it's no different from us. ***What's the difference between us and our friends who find their satisfaction and contentment in this world? There is no innate goodness in us. The difference is...The call of God. The grace of God.*** We are simply sinners saved from the fires of judgment by the grace of God. What a difference that makes and how we relate to one another

***Does not this passage of Scripture make your heart burn to see those who are now part of the world and in bondage to sin and idolatry drawn into the family of faith? Not that we can choose and elect, but that we can yearn and long to see those who are in the thrall of darkness and sin transformed by the grace of God.***

***The story of Abram proves that there is no one beyond reclamation when the spirit of God is at work.*** If this idolater can become the father of faithful, we need never give up hope on those to whom we bear witness. May God remind us where we came from."

Ligon Duncan