

A People Chosen By God

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Genesis 11.31 – 35

Introduction

As part of the series, **Key Events in Our History** I have selected a number of pivotal events that provide a panoramic view of ancient history. I have done so not only as a prelude to a series on the Book of Joshua, but also to reinforce a Biblical perspective and understanding of whom we are as Christians. The starting point of course is God's creation of the heavens and the earth, culminating with the creation of Adam and Eve in His image. However, it wasn't long before Satan succeeded in derailing God's creation. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and plunged all of creation into sin. Their sin broke not only their fellowship with God, but that of all their descendants. Death became the new norm for creation, and that which once functioned in perfect harmony now was filled with discord and alienation. Adam and Eve's descendants progressively turned aside from God and decided to do whatever they chose. They descended into an ever increasing spiral of sin and wickedness. Their abandonment of God was so great that 1,536 years after God had pronounced His creation very good, He determined to destroy all humankind, animals and birds on earth with a universal flood. Only those on the ark were spared. Noah and his family emerged from the ark 121 years later and began repopulating the earth. Piecing together the dates in the genealogies of Genesis 11.10 – 26 you will determine that Abram (Abraham) was born 352 years after the end of the flood, or 2,009 years after creation, which is approximately 2,160 BC.

Little did Abram (Abraham) know that he would become the patriarch of the best known group of people to ever live on earth, **A People Chosen By God**. The biblical account begins at a place identified as *Ur of the Chaldeans* (11.31). Months ago when I discussed this message with Beverley she stressed the need for a map so people could visualize Abram's journey. Since the option of projecting a map on a screen is gone for now, I have included a map in the Appendix. Most maps found in the backs of Bibles locate Ur in southern Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq), about 225 km northwest of the Persian Gulf. The prominence of Ur as a major Sumerian city and the many archeological finds there influenced the identification of it with the Ur of the Bible. However, the description in Genesis 11.28 and 31, *Ur of the Chaldeans*, was likely used to distinguish it from the well-known Ur in the south. The location of *Ur of the Chaldeans* is more likely in northern Mesopotamia, which today is in southern Turkey or north-eastern Syria. There are a number of reasons to support that, but a notable one is that the Ur of Abram's birth is *beyond the River* (i.e. the Euphrates River) (Joshua 24.3), while the traditional Ur is on this side, or the southern side of the Euphrates. Further, the journey from southern Ur to Haran is approximately 1,100 km while northern Ur is only 200 to 300 km. No significant Biblical truth hinges on this point but this bit of info may be of interest to some. The

location of Haran 4 miles north of the Turkish-Syrian border¹ is uncontested and people still live there.

One point of greater importance to us is the religion of Mesopotamia which influenced Abram and his family for years. It consisted of a variety of pagan gods and associated idols. It is into that environment of paganism that God intersected Abram's life.

Abram's Walk With God Unfolds

Despite being raised in an environment where pagan gods were integrated into Sumerian culture, the one and only true God chose Abram. Some two millenniums later, Stephen, who would thereafter be stoned, said this about God's call upon Abraham.

Acts 7:2–3 (ESV) 2 And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3 and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’”

That call is summarized in

Genesis 12:1 (ESV) Now 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.”

God reached through the darkness and invaded Abram's life with His indelible imprint. Thereafter Abram looked beyond the pagan gods of his culture and held to an unshakable belief in the one and only true God. He obediently responded by faith to God's call and that meant abandoning his culture and much of what he was familiar with.

Abram, together with his father Terah, his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot, travelled to Haran where they settled for some time. It isn't clear how long they were in Haran, but after his father's death at 205 (11.32; 12.4), Abram, at age 75 continued the journey to Canaan. His journey of about 600 km is shown on the attached map. Consider how momentous leaving Ur, and then Haran, and heading out by faith was. By today's standards, we might not consider his home anything other than unique (See picture in Appendix of typical homes in ancient Haran); however, he would never live in a home with solid walls again, only tents. The culture he had known from his birth would become a memory. He would never see, or talk to those people again. When people asked him where he was going, the best answer he could give was, “*I don't know.*” He was going to a land God would direct him to. His family back in Ur must have thought he was nuts. Despite all Abram would give up, he pressed forward with an unshakable belief and confidence in God who had intersected his life and told him to leave Ur to go to the place He would direct him to.

¹ Barry J. Beitzel, *The New Moody Atlas Of The Bible*, Moody, 2009, 98.

Don't miss an important tidbit of information inserted in the account.

Genesis 11:30 (ESV) Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

Sarai's barrenness would become a central focus throughout the ensuing years. Understandably so in light of God's promise to Abram that he would become a great nation which obviously required a son. With unwavering trust in God Abram held tightly to God's promise,

Genesis 12:2-3 (ESV) 2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Despite having no son and every human reason to doubt ever having a son, Abram didn't debate with God, but gathered all his belongings together, and with Sarai and Lot set out from Haran to Canaan.

Genesis 12:4-5a (ESV) 4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. 5 And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan.

Hundreds of years later Moses pointed out that God's choice of Abraham as the father of His chosen people was solely motivated by His love, His unmerited favor.

Deuteronomy 7:6-8 (ESV) 6 "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. 7 It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

We are grateful God's grace and unmerited favor continue to flow from His inexhaustible supply, for apart from His grace *we* would we excluded from His people.

God periodically restated His promise to Abraham. The second occasion followed Lot and Abram separating (13.14-17).

The years slipped by and Abram began to think God might fulfill His promise of an heir through Abram's servant, Eliezer, but God dismissed the suggestion. Instead God reiterated the magnitude of His promise which He visually impressed upon Abram by taking him outside to look at the stars which depicted the multitude that would one day follow after Abram.

Genesis 15:4–6 (ESV) 4 And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” 5 And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” 6 And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

If Abram had any doubts about God’s provision for him they were dispelled as God impressed upon him His promise to him. Notice Abram’s pivotal response.

Genesis 15:6 (ESV) And he believed the LORD, and **he counted it to him as righteousness.**

A key point Paul emphasized in his letter to the Romans is that salvation comes by faith alone, rather than a reward for works. Salvation is not something that can be earned. Paul pointed back to this occasion when God declared Abram’s salvation resulted exclusively from His faith in God, not from any works or deeds he had done.

Romans 4:2–3 (ESV) 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

A relationship with God is based solely upon faith; it is not gained through works, no matter how meritorious they may be. Good works or obedience to God exemplified by doing those things that please Him are the result from being saved.

Abram’s faith in God was so deeply rooted that he viewed the humanly impossible, as reality. God sealed His Covenant with Abram (Gen 15.7-17). However, Abram’s and Sarai’s waiting was far from over. If chapter 16 follows chronologically after chapter 15, at least another 14 years would pass while they continued to walk by faith. Abram and Sarai would wait a total of 24 years after they arrived in Canaan, talk about the biological clock ticking (Gen 17.1-8). God waited until Sarai was 90 (17.17), when there would be no doubt about the need for His miraculous intervention when she conceived and Isaac was born. Can you imagine if you were Abram and Sarai waiting 24 years for God’s promise to be fulfilled? We tend to be rather impatient if we need to wait a matter of months, but 25 years. They may have thought when they set out for Canaan and digested God’s promise of descendants that their wait was over and they would quickly have a child, but that wasn’t how it unfolded.

We of course have the benefit of knowing how it ended, but they didn’t know that during those decades of waiting; they just trusted God. We can picture the two of them talking together about God’s promise, praying for God’s intervention, perhaps questioning whether they misunderstood what God had told them. They were relatively normal people God chose for a very unique role, and one that demanded enormous faith and confidence in God. Most of us can relate to some of the dynamics in Abram’s and Sarai’s lives. Times when our faith was stretched to the breaking point; times when we were tempted to give up as we wondered about the faithfulness

of God. Fortunately, the Lord doesn't abandon us, just as He didn't abandon Abram and Saria throughout those years of waiting.

When we look back on times of trial and challenge we often clearly see God's hand, but when we were in the midst of the journey there were often times when that wasn't very apparent. Initially Abram may have thought that he would see many sons born and grandchildren also. That he would see the beginnings of this multitude God spoke to him about, but that wasn't how God envisioned it unfolding. Waiting is hard! So many walk away from God when they don't get the answer they expect from God or when He doesn't respond within their timeframe. God's timeline often differs dramatically from ours and His fulfillment may lie beyond our own generation as it did not only for Abraham, but also Isaac and Jacob. Consider the instructive insight we gain from the Letter to the Hebrews,

Hebrews 11:8–9 (ESV) 8 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. 9 By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.

Despite the fact that Abraham only got to see minimal growth in the size of his family during his lifetime, he tenaciously clung to God's promise; he looked well beyond the tents they lived in *to the city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God* (Heb 11.10). Abraham, and the patriarchs who followed him, never got to see the fulfillment of God's promise, but they clung to it knowing it would be fulfilled because God had said so.

Hebrews 11:13 (ESV) These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

They were so captivated with God and the certainty of His promises that they irrevocably trusted Him,

Hebrews 11:15–16 (ESV) 15 If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Abraham's faith was real as he demonstrated throughout the decades of waiting, something which would be repeated by Isaac and Rebekah, who interestingly was also barren (Gen 25.21), and they would wait 20 years for a son. Not only then, but today as well, God allows the faith of His children to be tested (1 Peter 1.6-7) so as to demonstrate to the community of saints and the watching world that it is genuine. That doesn't mean God's children don't ever stumble and make some bad decisions while they wait, Abraham certainly did. Nevertheless the big picture or overall character of Abraham's life was a journey of faith and trust in God.

Consider just few of examples of his faithful obedience we can glean from Scripture. First of all, without any protest or debate, he left Ur to go to Haran, and then to Canaan. One of the first things he did after arriving in Canaan was build an altar between Bethel and Ai where he called upon the Name of the Lord (Gen 12.8). Later after he and Lot separated, Abram returned to that altar and to call upon the name of the Lord (13.4). After Abram rescued Lot from his captors described in Genesis 14, Abram had an encounter with Melchizedek who prefigures Christ and to whom Abram gave a tithe (14.17-20). Many argue that tithing isn't a New Testament principle because it is part of the Law and we aren't under the Law. However, this incident takes place some 600 years before the giving of the Law and reflects a timeless principle of honoring God with the material possessions He entrusts to us. Abraham's relationship with God directed his values, priorities, and choices. Surely, the most difficult of all the steps of faithful obedience by Abraham had to be when he obeyed God's direction to sacrifice Isaac whom he and Sarah had waited for, for 25 years, succinctly summed up in,

Hebrews 11:17–19 (ESV) 17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, 18 of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." 19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

We read through the 175 year span of Abraham's life in a matter of minutes hence it seems like the God-moments he had were regular everyday experiences, but they were often separated by years, perhaps sometimes even a decade or more. Between those memorable encounters with God were long periods of simply believing in God and trusting Him with the promise they had stored away in the recesses of their minds. We all savor the mountaintop type of experiences with God, times when God seems ever so near and His promises so vivid. But much of life is in the valley where we need to live out those truths that God etches deep within our hearts. It is in the course of everyday life, sometimes in the midst of disappointment and hardship, times when waiting seems to be infinite, when we most reveal God's imprint on our hearts. It usually happens without much flash or fanfare, just the quiet, unspoken resolve God has given us to cling to Him and trust Him one more time.

Abraham's story is all about faith, trust, and obedience. We sometimes give attention to the missteps of the Patriarchs but have you noticed that God makes no mention of any of those missteps in Hebrews 11, only their obedient walk of faith? Abraham is a model of persevering faith for us to emulate; to hold tightly to the outstretched hand of God. To wait patiently and not give up, to not let go of God's hand when He doesn't respond as quickly as we thought He would, or when He answers differently, or when He leaves the answer to a successive generation as was the case with the Patriarchs. He asks us to lift our eyes well above the circumstances of today, whether they are pleasant or filled with hardship and uncertainty; He asks us to keep them focused on Him. Doing so doesn't mean that we become oblivious to things we need to be attentive to. Abraham didn't neglect care for his family and the responsibilities of daily life. Throughout our journey, God wants us to never lose sight of Him, particularly when we encounter disappointment. One of the potential benefits of

COVID-19 is to shore up our patience and persevering faith in our God – to never give in to the ambition of the unseen realm of darkness that we let go and give up on God.

Let me leave you with one more account from the Patriarchs; it is one you are all familiar with it. Following Isaac blessing Jacob and Esau, Esau was distraught he didn't get the blessing normally given to the first-born son, even though years earlier he had voluntarily sold his birthright to his brother Jacob. In the aftermath, Jacob retraced Abraham's steps back to Haran where he would work for his uncle, Laban. On Jacob's way from Beersheba to Haran he had a very definite God-encounter at a place that would thereafter be called Bethel. The event is described in Gen 28.10-22. Jacob stopped for the night and while sleeping he had the infamous dream labeled ***Jacob's ladder***.

Genesis 28:12–13 (ESV) 12 And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! 13 And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.

In the dream, God reiterated to Jacob the promise He had years earlier made to his grandfather Abraham,

Genesis 28:13–15 (ESV) 13 And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. 14 Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. 15 Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

The point I want to draw your attention to is the angels ascending and descending on the ladder which reached from earth to heaven. Fast forward almost 2,000 years to Jesus' reference to this event in His discussion with the first of His disciples.

John 1:51 (ESV) And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Notice that in Jesus' reference the ladder has been replaced by the Son of Man, i.e. Jesus. Jacob's dream looked forward to the day when Jesus would leave the glories of heaven to cloth Himself with humanity for the very purpose of paying the price for our sins such that He might bridge the gap created by sin between heaven and earth. Jesus would make a way for us to access heaven, He is the ***Ladder*** reaching from heaven to earth and the angels of heaven are pictured as ascending and descending upon Him as they minister to His children.

Jesus made it possible for us to know God. Something not dependent on our efforts or achieving some insurmountable standard, but freely available to all who place their faith and trust in Jesus as God's provision for their salvation. We are such privileged people. In these unsettling times it is easy to grow weary, even more so since the end doesn't appear to be in sight just yet. Many things we took for granted a year ago are out of reach for the time being. It has become much more difficult to address health issues having nothing to do with COVID-19. Many are coping with the challenges of managing children doing their schooling at home while fulfilling their job requirements. Some have faced reductions in their incomes. Today, we set out to do our essential shopping with a bit of hesitation. The list goes on and on. May you be inspired by the faith of Abraham and his successors who walked by faith when there was little evidence of the fulfilment of God's promise to establish a people of God. The key then, and now, is to keep our eyes clearly focused on God, knowing we are safe in His hands and He isn't about to abandon any of His children.

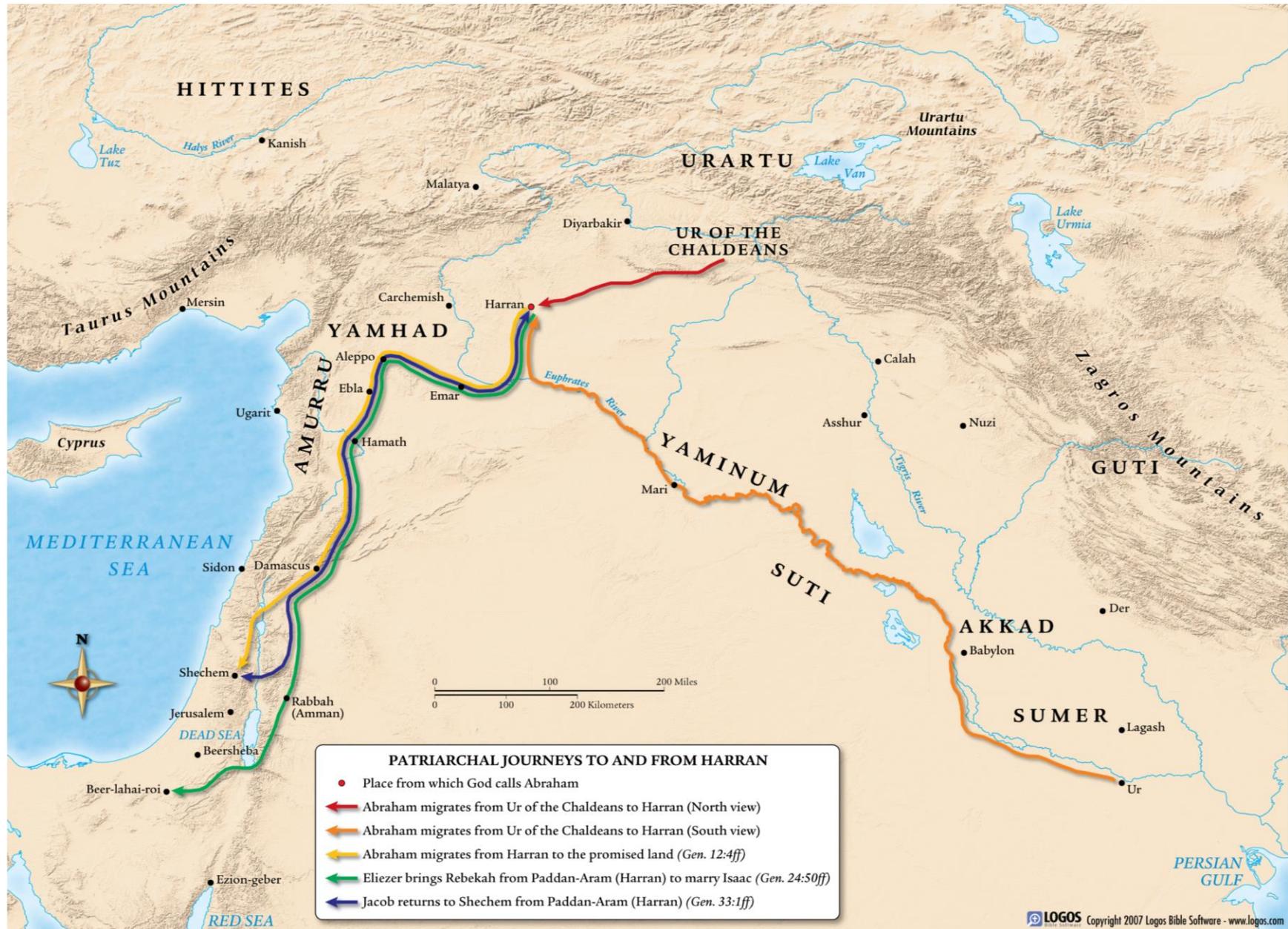
Walk with God today as one of His special people, chosen by Him.

May God minister to you and encourage you to emulate the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, especially when waiting seems long and your faith is stretched. Many of you will know the following song and it will touch your heart. Perhaps a few tears will run down your cheeks as you reflect on the words. It is one of many songs which is filled with memories for me.

God on the Mountain by Lynda Randle

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUBY9TxnAMw&ab_channel=FrankP

Map 1 – Location of Ur of Chaldeans and Haran



Typical Homes in Ancient Haran, Turkey



Abraham's Travels in Canaan

Christ-centred, Spirit-empowered, Mission-focused

