

To facilitate group discussion, Public Affairs Television, Inc. has created the 175 page *Talking About Genesis: A Resource Guide*. You can purchase a copy of the Resource Guide for \$5.95 wherever books are sold or by calling Doubleday at 1-800-323-9872. In Illinois, call 847-768-7000.

Below is an excerpt from the chapter "Call and Promise". In addition to the essay and activities found below, the full guide contains a discussion of how one man heard God's call in the modern world and how he changed his life as a result.

CALL AND PROMISE

THE STORY OF ABRAHAM AND SARAH:* GENESIS 11-13

The Lord said to Abraham, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." (Genesis 12:1, The Jewish Publication Society Torah)

Now read the story of God's call to Abraham and the first part of Abraham and Sarah's journey in your Bible. As you do, consider the following questions:

- What does it mean to be chosen? Were Abraham and Sarah chosen? Is chosenness accompanied by some moral obligation?
- If someone is chosen, does it necessarily mean that others are "unchosen"?
- We may see ourselves as following in Abraham's footsteps and continuing his journey, but do we, his twentieth-century descendants, still hear the voice of God?
- In contemporary times, how can we tell the difference between a prophet and a madman, between a call that's authentic and one that's imagined?

*Later, in Genesis 17, God changes Abram and Sarai's names to Abraham ("father of many nations") and Sarah ("princess") in recognition of the covenant God makes with them. Despite the importance of these and other name changes in Genesis, however, we use the most familiar names throughout this guide--Abraham, Sarah, Jacob--in order to avoid confusion.

RECOGNIZING GOD'S CALL

by Martin E. Marty

Perhaps the patriarchs didn't ask themselves this question, but more than likely even they did: How on earth can we tell if a call is real? In this short essay, Professor Martin E. Marty ponders the characteristics of a genuine call.

The beginning of the story of Abraham is brisk: "Now the Lord said to Abraham, 'Go' . . . So Abraham went." Go: That meant leaving land, clan, relatives, and immediate family. He went: That meant heading a great nation and becoming a blessing to all the families of the earth.

The story of Abraham is "only a story," say some scholars. But to most of the three billion people who are "Abrahamic"--Jews, Christians, and Muslims--that story shapes much of their lives and gives meaning to their hopes. Often these children of Abraham are not a blessing to each other: The accounts of crusades and jihads and holy wars involve them fighting with each other as much as with others. But you cannot

talk them out of the notion that the call to Abraham made them a people with special blessings and responsibilities. If we agree on nothing else, we can agree that the call was fateful. Most of the time, we slide too fast over the little words "the Lord said . . ." Should we trust a story that finds God saying something and half of the human race changing because a man heard what God said? There is no claim here that there were stone tablets or scrolls or other physical evidences of God saying anything in writing. "God said." That means: Abraham heard voices--or a voice. Should we trust the story, the voice? Does it come to others? To us? Keep your guard up and your fingers crossed. Who hears voices now? First, the fanatic. The fanatic has been defined as someone who knows he's doing what the Lord would do if the Lord were also in possession of the facts. Second, people with schizophrenia hear voices, sometimes a voice of the Lord. Third, religious prophets and apostles--in scriptures past and in contemporary life--hear them.

Most believers give a special status to the calls of long ago, attested to in the various scriptures. Today, though, self-proclaimed "prophets"--a David Koresh or a Jim Jones--claim to hear such a call and death follows. Founders of many new religions, most of them ephemeral, claim to hear such a call and delusion or frustration follows. You cannot talk them out of their claims, but only a few or a few thousand follow, so taking their claims seriously is not an issue for virtually all of the human race.

So it comes to ordinary people. Do they--do "we"--hear "the Lord said . . ."? Should they--should "we"--follow? Not being Abraham, how should we think of a "call"? How do we test one, if it comes? Most of the scriptures that talk about God talking also teach skepticism along with faith: "Test the spirits, to see whether they are of God." So the best advice is: If the call is too direct, too "miraculous"-sounding, beware. Through the centuries, the people who most felt called and did most with their call found their vocation not through a voice from the clouds or the mountains or even within themselves. Instead, they saw their whole lives as grounded in the mysterious care of a loving God, who does leave traces in history: in events, in scriptures, in the calls and demands of other people, in the faithful heart.

The serious people, at the end of whose life one can observe that they sensed a divine call, tend to be those who let God speak through a million little particulars in life. Odds are, those who lived their lives in response to such a demand and promise were challenged along the way by others. How can you tell if you or someone else was divinely called? Never rule out the possibility that a sense of a call and a calling will be a positive good: The world gets changed, often for the better, because of such responses. Trust the half-certain more than the cocksure; those who test their call in community more than those who go it alone. And never completely uncross your fingers or let your guard down: Response to the call can be dangerous, as many victims of called and chosen people and peoples could have attested. So, the story of Abraham and Sarah challenges, disturbs, and inspires us; it can change our ordinary lives and make us extraordinarily, if cautiously, responsive.

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ACTIVITIES FOR GROUPS AND FAMILIES

1) THE ART OF LEAVING (PART 1)

During the week before you meet, look for news reports, photographs, songs, films, books, or examples from history about families or groups that pulled up stakes and moved from a familiar place to a new, unknown home. (Think about your own parents or grandparents, Americans settling the West, the great migration of African Americans from the rural South to Northern cities, and immigrants coming to the United States.) Why did these people move? Did they believe they were fulfilling a personal destiny? A collective destiny? Have you ever picked up and moved to a new place? How do these historical and fictional accounts compare with your own or your family's experiences?

2) SAYING GOOD-BYE

Tape a big piece of paper up on the wall, then turn to Genesis 12:1 and have someone read the verse aloud to the group. (If possible, read the same verse from several other versions of the Bible, too.) Ask people to identify all the things that Abraham is leaving behind according to the passage and list them on the left-hand side of the paper. On the right-hand side of the paper, list all the promises that God then makes to Abraham. Then hand out blank paper to everyone and have group members spend a few minutes writing down their thoughts about why Abraham decided to go. What is driving him? What might hold him back? What do you think he hopes to find and achieve? Is Abraham interested in acquiring wealth and possessions? Enjoying an adventure? Finding a way to finally have children? Serving God? What is his understanding of the content of God's blessing? Are there responsibilities that go along with that blessing? Do you think Abraham knew God before this meeting? Do you think Abraham trusts God? Do you think he trusts himself? Does he know why God has chosen him? Using people's notes, as a group write a farewell letter from Abraham to the family and friends he is leaving behind.

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