

Faith to Begin the Journey

Rich Nathan
October 1 & 2, 2016
The Journey of Faith
Genesis 11:27-12:9

What is faith? We hear people say in hard times: You just need to have faith! I've had doubters say to me: I wish I had your faith. There are people who used to be in the church who say: I lost my faith.

What is faith? Over the next few months, I want to take an in depth look at the issue of faith as it is fleshed out in the life of a man named Abraham, who the Bible calls "the man of faith" and "the father of faith". In Abraham's life, we see faith modeled.

The model

One of my favorite pastimes is to read biographies. I love history and I love biographies. What's the point of studying the life of somebody who lived a long time ago who is now dead? Why read about people in the past? One major reason is that by studying biographies we learn how to navigate life when we go through similar experiences.

For example, maybe you're working with really difficult colleagues, some of whom have enormous egos. You're working in a really cutthroat political environment. What do you do? Well, you might want to read the biography of Dwight Eisenhower. During the Second World War, Eisenhower was put in the position of having to manage the egos of people like Charles de Gaulle, Winston Churchill, Patton and Montgomery, all of whom believed they were God's gift to the world. You read the biography of Ike and you learn how to survive when you are working with a team of people, all of whom have massive egos.

Or maybe you're working for a crazy boss who constantly puts down her employees and refuses to share power. Read the story of King David in the Old Testament who worked for King Saul, who was absolutely paranoid for 12 years. From David's example you can learn lessons about working for an oppressive supervisor.

Or maybe you have an unresolvable dispute with a relative that's been going on for years. Study the story of Jacob and his Uncle Laban to find out what you do when your relationship with a relative hits the wall.

Or you feel like you obeyed what God told you to do, only it has turned out terribly for you. Now you feel confused, conflicted and angry. You feel ripped off by God. Read the story of Jeremiah and how he dealt with feeling betrayed by God.

You see, it's not enough to learn some principles or some lesson in the abstract. It's far more helpful for each of us to see that principle, that lesson, fleshed out and embodied in the life of a person. We all need role models.

Think about one or two people in your life that you admire. Maybe it was a former teacher or a world leader or a parent or a friend or a pastor. Those of who are adults tend to give little thought to the idea of having role models in our lives. We usually think of children as needing role models. But adults, if you stop and consider who influences you most now, I think you will agree that it's people who you admire who have taught you the most important lessons in life.

Of course, not every role model is positive. Negative role models have a massive impact on us as well. When you work for a company in which bad behavior is regularly rewarded with a promotion or with respect – lying to customers, cutting corners, cheating on your spouse, cheating on your taxes. When bad behavior is rewarded and applauded, then people quickly learn that what is required to succeed is bad behavior.

Leadership in the Bible is primarily modeling because most life lessons are not taught; they're caught. We reproduce what we are. The major reason to study the life of Abraham is that he is a role model of faith. In fact, Abraham is revered by the majority of the world as the Father of Faith. He's looked to by Jews, by Muslims and by Christians as blazing the trail of faith in the one true God.

The Apostle Paul writes this:

Galatians 3:9

So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Romans 4:16

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

There's one main thing that I want to get across during this series on the life of Abraham that will take us almost to Christmas. That is, faith is a way of life for God's people.

Faith is a lifelong journey – left foot, right foot, left foot. Faith is not just something you go in for when you choose to trust in Jesus Christ for your salvation.

As Habakkuk says:

Habakkuk 2:4

“See, the enemy is puffed up;
his desires are not upright—
but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness—

Faith is a lifelong task. We might compare faith to a marriage. You don’t know everything you need to know to have a successful marriage on your wedding day. Your wedding day is just the beginning. But succeeding in marriage with all the ups and downs, through unemployment and health crises, through child raising and home moves, having a successful marriage is a lifelong task.

Faith is like parenting. Having a baby doesn’t make you an expert parent. You can take all kinds of courses in early childhood education, but when your child has a stronger will than you do at age two, suddenly you realize you don’t know anything.

Faith that begins our relationship with Jesus is just an introduction. Things start with a simple decision to trust in Christ for our salvation, but as many of us have learned: our childhood faith is not necessarily sufficient for adult-sized problems. Those who continue on in faith have learned an adult-sized faith for adult-sized problems. Faith that is exciting to someone in their teens or their 20’s is not necessarily sufficient to get us through middle age or old age.

Faith is a lifetime task. It’s not static. Left foot, right foot, left foot. Faith needs to carry us from child-raising to child-releasing, from career to cancer, from practicing hospitality to entering hospices, and from weddings to widowhood. Every stage of life, every challenge of life, every part of life is either going to be a step forward in faith or a step backwards in unbelief.

Over the next several months, we’ll be looking at how faith was embodied in the life of one man, Abraham – the man of faith, the father of faith. In a series I’ve titled “The Journey of Faith” we’re going to begin with a message I’ve titled, “Faith to Begin the Journey.”

Let’s pray.

Acts 7:2-4

2 To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran.

3 ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’

4 “So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living.

Abraham, the Father of Faith for the three great monotheistic religions, lived 4,000 years ago in a part of the world known as Mesopotamia, the Fertile Crescent, which

would be in modern day Iraq. He grew up in a civilization that worshipped many gods of their own invention. A civilization that did not recognize or worship the one true God, the Creator of all things. In this environment of gross idolatry and superstition, God spoke and he issued a call to Abraham.

The call

We read these words in Genesis

Genesis 12:1

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

We know this man by the name Abraham, but he was born Abram. God changed his name at a critical point in his life. But for the first 99 of his 175 years, he went by the name Abram, which means “the Father is exalted”.

The Bible tells us that, like his neighbors, Abram worshipped a variety of gods. Why from the mass of humanity did God call this one man, Abram? Why from the mass of humanity did God reveal himself to this one man, Abram? Did Abram turn from his idols and begin seeking after God? Did Abram somehow attract the notice of God by his goodness? Nothing in the Bible suggests that. Abram was simply a recipient of God’s unmerited grace. The one true Creator, for reasons known only to him, chose to reveal himself to Abram. If you know God, it’s because the one true Creator for reasons known only to him has chosen to reveal himself to you. For it is by grace that we are saved through faith.

We’re seeing here the beginning of the journey of faith. God issues a call that first involves a call to himself. “Come to me,” God says. “Turn your heart to me.” A call by the one true Creator who says to you, “Trust in me. Believe in me. Look to me.” And in Abram’s life, as well as all of our lives, a call to relationship with God is followed by a call to a particular task, a particular place.

Imagine how hard it must have been for Abram. At age 75, having put down a lifetime of roots in the city of Ur, surrounded by friends and family, to suddenly decide to pick up and leave.

It says:

Hebrews 11:8

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

Imagine the conversation he had with his neighbors:

“Abram, what are you doing?”

“We’re moving.”

“Really? Why are you moving? Your family has lived in this place for generations. Why are you moving?”

“Well, God told me to move.”

“God told you to move? Which God?”

“The one true God. The Creator of all things.”

“Really? And where did he tell you to move to?”

“I’m not sure.”

“So God told you to move, but he didn’t tell you where you’re going to end up?”

“No.”

“What are you going to do when you get to this mysterious place?”

“I don’t know. The only thing I know is that God will be there as well.”

Why would anyone set out from what is comfortable, what is familiar, to what is uncomfortable and the unfamiliar? The only reason is because they really have heard from God.

John Wimber, the father of the Vineyard movement, used to say,

“Faith is spelled R-I-S-K.”

So long as a bird stays in its nest, it does not know the wonder of flight. So long as a child clings to the edge of the pool, that child will never know the wonder of having the water hold your body up as you swim. So long as we hold on to the familiar and the safe and the comfortable, we never know what God would do if we’d only say “yes” to him.

Abram was told to leave his home and his family and to venture out. What you see in Abram’s life is what we discover in our own lives. Faith is a difficult thing. We’re not always advancing. Sometimes it’s three steps forward and two steps back.

Here's what we read in:

Acts 7:3-4

3 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'

4 "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living.

We don't know why Abram settled in Harran and didn't continue on the journey to the Promised Land. Maybe his father was too tired. Maybe Harran was really attractive. In any case, Abram waited in Harran for perhaps 15 years until his father died. 15 years in which we read about no communication from God. No fresh revelation of the Lord. How many of you started off responding to the call of God and then stopped because there was an attractive alternative? Somewhere along the way you made a comfortable compromise. You said, "I think I'll settle here." Instead of going for everything that God had for you.

The Bible says that Abram took his father, Terah, with him instead of fully obeying what God said – leave your family, leave your father's home. It seems that Abraham compromised his call. And the reason that we often compromise our call is because we take a Terah with us. Let me ask you a question: what is your Terah? Maybe a relationship with a girlfriend or a boyfriend, someone in your family, that you will not let go of, but that's keeping you from entering your Promised Land. Maybe your Terah is the security of a comfortable job despite the fact that you feel that God is saying, "Move on!" But you can't let go.

It says in Acts 7:4

Acts 7:4

4 "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living.

It was only after the death of his father that Abram moved on to the Promised Land. Terah needs to die. Whatever is holding you back needs to die so you can respond to God's call.

Let's continue:

Genesis 12:1-4

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

2 "I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

3 I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.

God didn't just issue a call to Abram. The call was accompanied by a promise.

The promise

You know, every one of God's commands always contain with them a promise? Jesus commands,

Matthew 11:28

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

You're weighed down, you're overwhelmed by life. Jesus says, “Come to me”, but then there's a promise. Why should I come to Jesus? Jesus says, “because I will give you rest. Because you can give me everything that's weighing you down, everything that's crushing you in life.”

We read the command: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ”. Why? Why should I believe on the Lord Jesus Christ? Here's the promise: “And you will be saved.”

You know, friends, it takes faith to find the promise when all you feel in the moment is a command from God. Do this thing. Say this thing. Give this money. Break off this relationship. Say no to this temptation. Take this risk. It takes faith to open our hearts to God and to believe that hidden in God's commands to us is a promise. A promise of a better life. A promise of a more abundant life. A promise of nearness to God.

Five times in Genesis 12, God mentions his intention to bless. One theologian wrote that the God of the Bible is bent toward blessing. Here's what we read:

God starts with one man and he decides to change the world through that one man. God says, “I'm going to bless every nation through you, Abram.” I just wonder what God could do through the lives of every one of you that's listening to me today if you simply chose to trust and obey him. Maybe your family is not particularly serious about following Christ. How many generations of people could you affect? How big a blessing could you be for generations to come if you simply responded to call of Christ today and said “yes” to him? You may not yet be a Christian. Maybe you come from a messed up

home. What new thing could God start through your life if you simply decided today to surrender your life to Christ?

I wonder how much blessing has not come into the world despite God's call, despite God's revelation to individuals. Because many of us responded with unbelief. We've heard the call, we just didn't allow ourselves to believe that we could be instruments of blessing.

In beginning this journey of faith, we've had the call. Through faith, we hear the promise. And faith always requires:

The tent

Genesis 12:8

⁸ From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.

Hebrews 11:8-9

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹ By faith he made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

When Abram left Harran, he was 75. When he died he was 175. He spent 100 years, a whole century, moving around living in tents, no permanent place. I think what we see in the tent is something that is essential to the growth of faith. I'm talking about a certain detachment from everything in this world. I'm talking about an open-handed loose grip on everything in this life.

When people who are not followers of Christ look at Christians and they see us having a death grip on some little bit of this world – our job – and we're just as anxious and beaten down and ambitious and political as those who don't know Christ, when they see our reaction to all this and we're just as discouraged, just as angry, just as frustrated as those who don't know Christ. When they see our death grip on our possessions and the way we react to the loss of a sale or the loss of a promotion or the loss of a home or the theft of a car or the loss of a loved one. Those who are not yet Christians don't detect anything different, any note of hope, any joy in the midst of trial, any confidence in the future, is it any wonder that people don't want to sign up for what we claim to believe?

Faith always involves living in a tent. Having a loose grip on anything and everything in this world. When my kids were growing up, my family did a lot of tent camping. We camped all over the eastern half of the United States. We kept it really simple. The

tent, our sleeping bags that we'd roll out on the floor of the tent, some cooking equipment and a couple of lawn chairs to sit on as we built campfires at night. Invariably, whether it was a state park or national park there was that group of people who would pull up in their massive RV. Occasionally, you'd see something like this:

This is bigger than a Greyhound bus. It costs five times as much. At night, they are consuming the electricity of a small city as they are running their air conditioning.

Look at this thing! This is what someone's going camping in! It's got granite countertops. The stove is bigger than the one we have in our kitchen. You always see these people who have got rolled up AstroTurf that they roll out in front of their RV so they don't have to contend with mud or grass. That's a picture of how many people try to live the Christian life. Yes, I want to go camping. I want an adventure with Jesus, but I want it on my own terms. I don't ever want to be uncomfortable. I don't ever want to sacrifice. I'm going to make one simple point before we look at the last thing in this text.

God's kingdom cannot be extended without some people loosening their grip on this world, choosing the tent over the mammoth RV. For God's kingdom to be extended, some people are going to have to say, "I will give up some money. I will pay for this." Some people are going to have to say, "I will give up some social standing with my neighbors, with my co-workers, with my family." Some people are going to have to say, "I am willing to undergo some level of personal embarrassment to extend this message." Some people are going to have to say, "I am willing to give up the comfort of my home, my extended family, my country to go across the world to bring this gospel message to people who have never heard."

The gospel cannot be extended without the willingness on the part of you and me to suffer for its sake.

This, by the way, is the law of the harvest that Jesus laid out in John 12.24,

John 12:24-26

24Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

25Those who love their life will lose it, while those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

26Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

This is the law of the harvest. In order to have many seeds, one must die. You say: I want many seeds in my family. I want many people in my family to know Jesus. Then

you must die. At least of embarrassment; you have to take the risk of sharing your faith with your family. You want many seeds in your school? You've been praying that some of your classmates might get to know Jesus; you have to die; you have to risk that some people might not like you, or might think that you are too religious, especially in a secular society that believes that faith is fine as long as it is kept in the private sphere or within the walls of religious institutions; but that expressions of faith have no business in the public sphere.

Jesus tells us that if the gospel is going to be extended, someone has to pay the price.

So let me ask you a personal question: Are you willing to risk it in your work place, at appropriate times and in thoughtful ways to express your Christian faith? Are you willing to risk not be accepted by a few people whose opinions matter to you? Are you willing to be the grain of wheat that falls to the earth and dies? Are you willing to choose the tent as a way of approaching your life in the world?

We talked about the call, the promise, the tent, and finally I'd like to talk about

The altar

Slide Genesis 12:6-7

⁶ Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

Slide Genesis 12:8

⁸ From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.

How do we venture out with God? How do we decide that, yes, I'm going to obey God's call? To choose the tent instead of the traveling mansion. It says that Abram built an altar.

This business of faith – it's not a matter of reading a book and following a particular recipe. It's not a matter of learning a few principles and memorizing those principles. The way that faith grows in our lives is by us building an altar, a place where you meet with God. See, faith springs from you building your own relationship, your own secret history with God. If you are ever going to loosen your grip on this world, you need something more compelling, something more attractive – you need an altar. A place where you meet with God.

Trust in Christ grows as you spend time with Christ. You don't just hear about Jesus. You learn to be with Jesus. You get to know Jesus. You admire Jesus more. You spend time with Jesus in the gospels. You spend time talking with Jesus. You spend time listening to Jesus. You spend time opening your heart to Jesus.

An altar that I've had for over 20 years. I sit in this chair in the morning and I meet with God. Build an altar in your study, in your bedroom, in your dorm room, in a corner of your office, in your living room. Here is where I meet with Jesus. Here is where I develop my secret history with him. Here is where I connect with God as I embark on my own personal journey of faith.

Let's pray.

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- II. The call
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