



In 1859 the famous tightrope walker Charles Blondin attempted the greatest tightrope feat the world had ever heard of: he attempted to go a quarter of a mile across the mighty Niagara Falls. He walked across the rope, 160 feet above the falls, several times, each time adding a stunning and daring object. He did it once in a sack, then on stilts, then on a bicycle, then in the dark, and he even carried a stove and cooked an omelet! A large crowd gathered and a buzz of excitement ran along both sides of the river bank. The crowd "Oooohed!" and "Aaaaahed!" as Blondin carefully walked across one dangerous step after another, blindfolded and pushing a wheelbarrow. Upon reaching the other side, the crowd's applause was louder than the roar of the falls! Blondin suddenly stopped and addressed his audience: "Do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow?" The crowd enthusiastically shouted, "Yes, yes, yes. You are the greatest tightrope walker in the world. You can do anything!" "Okay," said Blondin, "Then I need one volunteer to get in the wheelbarrow." No one dared to get inside the wheelbarrow.

The story of Charles Blondin paints a real life picture of faith and belief. The crowd had watched his daring feats. They said they believed, but their refusal to get into the wheelbarrow proved they truly didn't. In our passage of scripture today, Genesis 12, Abram is contacted by God with a daring offer too: An offer to leave everything he knows to start a new nation, an offer to take a step of faith. Abram's response not only shapes the course of Israelite history but shapes our history as well. When he says "yes" to God, he models for us belief in action. The question that emerges from this passage is this: What does belief in action require? We'll see in this passage of scripture that it requires three elements.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they

came to the land of Canaan. Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite was then in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. Abram journeyed on, continuing toward the Negev (Genesis 12:1-9).

Three words that I'll be highlighting from this passage today are Call, Identity and Faith.

Call

The first element that belief in action requires is a **call**. Look at verse 1. God **calls** Abram to leave his "world" by asking him to leave three huge parts of his life behind. Look in verse 1 at what Abram is called to leave:

- Your Country – known places, where he worked
- Your Relatives – extended family, co-workers
- Your Father's house – oldest son, wealth, a secure future

Wow! That's a lot to leave behind, isn't it? It's appropriate for us to wonder how we'd respond to this invitation. Would we be willing to leave so much?

Notice that God doesn't even tell Abram where to go. Verse 1 says **"to the land I will show you."** Can you plug that into your GPS?

Imagine the scene when Abram shares with his family that they are moving. Abram says, "We've got an exciting adventure ahead of us. We're moving."

"To where?" the questions start coming.

Abram responds, "Well, that's a good question, one I've thought a lot about myself. And I have an interesting answer for you. I don't know."

Looks of concern and disbelief form on his family members' faces.

"But," Abram assures them, "The Lord has given me instructions and I trust him. He says he will show me where to go. And I believe him. So we're moving. And the Lord has made some amazing promises to me. So while we may be losing some

things—familiarity, predictability, and geographic security—the promises he's made me are even better."

The promises are also part of Abram's **call** and they're seen in verses 2-3, a list of what God will give Abram. I see seven promises that God makes to Abram.

- Make you into a great nation
- Bless you
- Make your name great
- You will be a blessing
- Bless those who bless you
- Curse those who curse you
- All people on earth will be blessed through you

What a high honor it is to be called by the King of Kings. Note that Abram didn't earn this invitation by being a super moral guy, or by being the most popular guy in Haran, or the most highly gifted leader. He was chosen by God because God wanted to bless him and bless all of humanity through him. Simple as that. From the Bible, it's clear that Abram's father worshipped many gods, from Genesis 11. To what degree Abram himself participated in this is unclear. But what is clear is that Abram had somewhere between very little to no interaction with the true God. And Abram was so impressed, awed, overwhelmed, honored he said "yes" to this **call** from God.

Isn't that the way it worked for many of us, too? God impresses and overwhelms us and we respond with a "yes." I think of a guy named Alex that I was talking to about Jesus and the truths of the Bible. He had grown up Jewish, married a Christian woman and started attending our Christian church. Alex had a lot of hard questions. Alex had a proud history. Alex had a lot of baggage. After a month, Alex came to the point where he was impressed, awed, overwhelmed and honored, too. He still had some questions. He still had a proud history. And he still had baggage. But he could no longer resist the all-powerful, all-loving God of the universe. God was calling him and Alex said "yes." He accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

And the choice is the same for us. Do you sense that God is calling you to do something? I remember when I felt God was calling me to be a pastor. I was petrified. I didn't know anything about being a pastor. I would lose a lot and I would gain a lot. God calls all of us, not just pastors. If you remember last week in Mark's sermon he taught us that it mentions three times that the Corinthian church was called.

Maybe God is calling you and you've never said "yes" to him. Maybe you've said "yes" to him in the past and you've been resisting him lately. If so, let me encourage you to say yes to God's call. And let me remind you that the primary emotion people experience when they're called is fear because the calling is always to unknown territory, filled with uncertainty. Yes, great potential

is there but so is great failure. If you are afraid, that's perfectly normal.

There's a principle here: Being called to something means be called away from something, too. Therein lies the tension and the fear that Abram experienced and we experience. But we don't want to give into fear. We serve and follow the all-powerful God of the universe. God's not calling us to go and do something on our own. God will always be with us, empowering us, changing us, growing us and reshaping us.

Identity

The second element that belief in action requires is a new **identity**.

Do you wonder why God would call Abram to leave so much behind? Remember I just said that when we say "Yes" to God's call he will be with us, empowering us and changing us? Well, that change involves God giving us a new identity.

There were three aspects that created the **identity** of Abram's life, meaning that Abram was defined by these. We see these in verse 1.

- Country - He was known by where he lived and the job he performed.
- Relatives - He was known by his relationships with others. Friendships, boss/employee structures, neighbor, his role in the community.
- Father's house - he was known as the oldest son of Terah. As such, he would inherit everything upon his father's death. This gave him financial security and high social standing.

See how God was calling him away from what he was known for, calling him away from so much of what defined him, so much of what created his **identity**.

He didn't know it but he was going to switch from a man-made identity to a God-made identity. God was going to do this in him because you can't be the father of God's nation with a man-made identity. There are a lot of problems with man-made identity. One of them is that it's fragile. It can be lost, broken or stolen. A man-made identity is as fragile as the whim of someone's opinion or the economy or your health—unstable and unpredictable.

For example, let's think about ourselves. What makes up our identity?

- Cool sunglasses
- Shoes (come on women you know it's true!)
- Being physically fit
- Net worth
- Your education: multiple post-graduate degrees, doctorates
- Physical appearance: hair, skin, height, body shape, etc.
- Your role as a mother, brother, sister, father
- Your role in your company

- Cook, athlete, word worker, etc.

Look at how fragile all of these are. Every one of them can be so easily taken away or lost. If that happens, who are you? Abram was probably wondering this, too.

How about how people identify themselves by negative qualities? Perhaps you feel this way, struggling with a low self-image, addiction, failure, anger or some other kind of sin. These qualities are so ingrained sometimes that we allow them to define our very existence.

Finish this sentence: "When I think of myself, I would say I am a _____." Whatever you fill into this blank is a big part of your identity.

What does God think of this—our attempts to create an identity for ourselves? God is grieved. He wants to be the only one who defines who we are. I think a Biblical principle is revealed here: God is passionately committed to giving us the best. This involves replacing our man-made identity with a God-made identity.

This involves God taking parts of us away and replacing what was taken with something better, little by little, remaking our identity. You could think of it like the wooden tower in the game, Jenga. In this game, there is a wooden tower constructed of pieces of wood. On each move a piece of the tower is removed from below, then replaced in a new location on top. Slowly, over the course of the game, the shape and structure of the tower completely changes. Now, imagine that tower is you and God is removing pieces and placing new and better pieces on the tower. That's what God does when he remakes our identity.

You might be wondering what a God-made identity involves. That's a huge question and answer that I can't cover this morning but in short I'd say it is this:

We are a dearly loved child of the God of the universe. And as a dearly loved child, God has given us his righteousness, his unconditional love, his eternal favor. This should fundamentally shape our identity.

I believe the main reason God calls Abram to leave so much behind related to his identity. God wanted to take Abram away from his known identity in order to give him a new one. In fact, this process was so thorough with Abram that in the chapters to come we'll see that God gave him a new name, Abraham, to signify his new identity. He does this with us as well. When we become a Christian, Jesus becomes our **new** identity. And he is revealed in us through the life-long process of character development.

As I'm talking about this, is God bringing to mind any places where you are relying on man-made identity? Turning to fragile things for your very sense of being? If so, the solution is to confess them as the sin they are. No one deserves to build our identity except God himself. God-made identity is firm, like carbon

steel, the hardest metal in the world. If God makes us, we cannot be lost, broken or stolen.

As a slight side note let me touch on the result of having a God-made identity: Increased confidence. This came to me this week as I was praying for my kids. At bedtime, when I'm tucking them in, I lay my hands on each of my kids and pray for them. I pray that they'll love people boldly. I pray they'll serve others with generosity. I pray they'll be sacrificial in their time, their ideas and their possessions. And it hit me, only a highly confident person can live like this. An insecure person is always grasping and taking and I am praying that my kids will be givers. And that doesn't just happen. When we create our identity with man-made elements, we have to keep taking from others. The only way to break the cycle is to allow God to remake us with a God-made identity. When that happens we are freed up to love boldly and serve generously because I'm no longer affected by your rejection.

Are you interested in having increased confidence? It comes with a new identity and is offered to you when we say "yes" to God's call. And saying "yes" reveals the third theme that jumps out of this passage—**faith**.

Faith

The third element that belief in action requires is **faith**. And this is the big one. Look at the four ways Abram acted in faith.

By faith, Abram left Haran. This is seen in verses 4-5. Until this point, everything was talk. Challenging ideas. Interesting ideas. But nothing more than that. Abram had to act in obedience to God's call in order to show that he believed. That's belief in action.

By faith, Abram overcame the obstacle of offspring. He and Sarai were past child-bearing age. How do you become the father of a nation of people if you can't have children, grandchildren, great grandchildren? Genesis 11:30 tells us that Sarai was barren. Verse 4 tells us that Abram was 75 years old. Those are big obstacles!

By faith, Abram overcame the obstacle of Canaanites in the land. When Abram arrived, the land wasn't empty and waiting for him. There were Canaanites living there. They had farms, fields, shops. Abram was outmanned and outnumbered. With both of these obstacles, the solution would be miraculous and not natural. Abram was going to see that God was able and willing to accomplish the humanly impossible, if Abram would be a man of faith. All Abram had to do was put his belief into action.

By faith, Abram worshipped God. In verses 7-8 Abram built altars and gave praise to God—**before** the land was filled with God's new nation. Building an altar was a visible way to worship God in that time. And it was a way to claim the land as God's. Isn't that an inspirational step of faith? I love that. Even before Abram had children to start this new nation, he was claiming

the land where this nation would live. In a lot of ways this is how faith works in our lives as well. Our lives aren't all put together. We aren't experiencing the completion of all of God's promises, yet we're called to worship him.

In each of these cases, Abram was acting in faith, putting his belief into action. Now, don't miss this part—Abram got his beliefs from God's words. We get our belief from God's words today as well. When we think about taking steps of faith in our lives, these steps need to be from God's word, filtered by God's word and consistent with God's word.

Let me share an example I've observed with you from the CPC community that illustrates faith.

I think of the elders setting some Big Hairy Audacious Goals in Vision 2010 that was shared last week in the elder's report. In essence, they said, "We want to reach more people with the good news of Jesus." That's directly from God's word. Their beliefs were put into action—faith—when you took a big step of faith and started the Millbrae campus. And it will be revealed again when the South campus is launched. That's faith, belief in action.

Conclusion

I asked a question at the beginning: What does belief in action require. It requires the three elements we see in our passage today: a call, a new identity and taking a step of faith.

My family and I have been experiencing this firsthand over the past 18 months. Sensing that God was calling us to a new ministry, I said "yes" to him although I was filled with fear. That was hard because we loved our city, our church and our lives in Southern California. But I did say "yes." Have you ever waited on God for something? As I waited 18 months for God to show me where to go, I was often confused and frustrated. But I see now that he was reshaping my identity during that time. And here I am today. In a great place. I love CPC. My family and I have been so warmly welcomed and we know that we are exactly where God wants us to be.

What about you? Here's the wheelbarrow. God is calling you to get inside, offering you a new identity and your response of faith reveals whether you truly believe him. Will you get in? Will you take that scary step of faith?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.