



This is our second week in our journey through the Bible called The Story. Last week we began by looking at Genesis 1–11. Genesis 1–11 is like a wide angle shot. It addresses universal themes relating to all humanity. It answers questions like: Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? What's wrong with us? Genesis 1–11 crunched 2,000 years of history into just eleven chapters. But today we start with Genesis 12, and it's like a zoom lens has been attached to the camera. Now we'll zoom in on one man and his descendants. The rest of Genesis, almost 40 chapters, covers just four generations of this man's family.

One of the things we saw in Genesis 1–11 is, although God created humanity in his image; although he blessed them and placed them in a beautiful garden; although they enjoyed intimate fellowship with God; despite all those things, the human race rebelled against God, and there were consequences for that. Three times in the first eleven chapters of Genesis God's judgment fell: Adam and Eve were first banished from the garden; and then, except for Noah and his family, the human race was destroyed by the flood; and finally, they were divided by diverse languages at the Tower of Babel. Despite all of that, the problem of sinned remained.

Then we come to chapter 12, which is like a hinge on which the rest of the Old Testament turns. Starting here, God himself begins to act to reverse the consequences of sin. He does so by zooming in on one man and his descendants. When we first meet him his name is Abram. Later, God calls him Abraham. With Abraham God purposes to provide a solution to humanity's sinful dilemma and restore them to a place of blessing. God's program for redemption begins with the story of Abraham, and this will continue in his son, Isaac, and Isaac's son, Jacob.

This section of The Story focuses on these three men, called the Patriarchs, but our focus is on Abraham. He lived right around 2,000 B.C. The wonderful thing about Abraham and many other Old Testament saints is they teach us so much about how to walk with God. Paul speaks of the lives of Old Testament figures like Abraham and says, *"These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us ..."* (1 Corinthians 10:11). In Romans he adds, *"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope"* (Romans 15:4).

More than anything else, what Abraham teaches us about is faith. Repeatedly, in the New Testament, he's held up for us

as the example of how God works in our life to develop faith. Hebrews 11 says, *"And without faith it is impossible to please God ..."* Abraham is chief of all the heroes of faith recorded in that chapter. He teaches us what it means to live a life of faith. How's your faith? Is your faith growing or has it stagnated?

At the end of Genesis 11 we're introduced to Abraham's father, Terah, and we're told he moved his family from Ur of the Chaldeans to Harran. Abraham was already 75 years old and married, but his wife was childless. Ur was a well developed city of the ancient world with at least a quarter of a million people. It was in Harran that God first appeared to Abraham.

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

**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.**

**I will bless those who bless you,**

**and whoever curses you I will curse;**

**and all peoples on earth**

**will be blessed through you."**

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. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

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. 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.

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.

Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev (Genesis 12:1–9).

### **Abraham's Faith was a Response to the Call of God**

What Abraham does here is impressive. The Lord asks him to leave all that was familiar to him and set out for an unseen

place. But before we talk about that it's important to recognize Abraham's faith was a response to the call of God. God was the one who took the initiative in Abraham's life. God sovereignly acted to reverse the tide of human decadence by taking the initiative in one man's life.

He didn't do it because Abraham was such a godly man. Abraham and his family worshipped idols (Joshua 24:2-3). There's no indication God chose him because he was somehow better than someone else. We're not told why he chose Abraham. I'm sure there were other candidates. We read later Abraham does prove to be faithful, but he also was far from perfect. I find that encouraging! God calls broken and messed up people like you and me to serve and follow him. Maybe you didn't grow up in a godly home. Maybe you feel like you've worshipped counterfeit gods in your life. "Why would God want anything to do with me?" Maybe you feel like your best days are behind you. God's choice of Abraham offers you hope there's a spot for you in God's Story.

The bottom line is whatever faith we have is a response to the initiative of God in our lives. The Bible says in Romans 3:11-12, *"...there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."* Some people are offended that God chooses one person and not another. But for God to choose anyone is an act of grace. God always makes the first move. He has to because there's no one who seeks God! We want to be men and women of faith, but apart from God such things wouldn't even matter to us. Out of his grace and mercy, God initiated with us, and whatever faith we have is a response to him. The great thing about this is, if God is the one who calls us in the first place, then he'll provide everything we need. It's not about our being good enough; it never was.

### **Abraham's Faith was Invested in God's Promises**

You can see Abraham's faith was invested in the promises of God. Notice how many times God says, "I will." This story is more about what God does for Abraham than what Abraham does for God. The Lord sends him to a new land and essentially promises two things. First, he says, "I will make of you a great nation." A nation includes both land and people with political control of its own affairs and destiny. The implication is those people would come from Abraham; they'd be his descendants. This was the origination of the Jewish nation. The other thing God promises is blessing, both for Abraham and through Abraham and his descendants. God says "I will bless you. I will make your name great." Abraham lived a long, full, and rich life. His name is great. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all honor Abraham as a founder of their faiths. Abraham will also be a blessing to others. He'll be blessed so he could pass on that blessing. When God blesses us it's never just for us, but it's meant so we can also be a blessing to others. God even promises through Abraham's seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. That's an amazing promise!

When we talk about Israel as God's chosen people we need to understand the purpose of that. God chose Israel not just to bless them, not as the end game, but so through them the whole world would be blessed. From the very start Israel had a missionary purpose. Ultimately, this promise would be fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus was one of Abraham's descendants. Through Jesus the blessing of salvation would be available to all the families of the earth. Paul could even say to the Galatians, *"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise"* (Galatians 3:28-29).

### **Abraham's Faith was Demonstrated by Obedience**

For Abraham, that was something he never could have imagined. In the meantime, he's asked to do something very difficult. It's easy for us to look at what God was asking him to do and think, "Wow, how exciting. I'd love to go on an adventure like that!" This wasn't a short-term mission trip or a vacation to an exotic place. This would require tremendous faith for Abraham. God was asking him to leave his country, his people, and his father's house. God was asking him to leave all that was familiar to him and set out for a totally unfamiliar place. He was leaving both his financial and physical security. Abraham wasn't some poor wanderer living in a tent when he heard God's voice. He was a wealthy man, living in a modern city. By leaving his father's household he was giving up his inheritance and right to the family land. Sure he was able to take some possessions with him, but he was leaving a lot behind.

God's call would also mean leaving both his personal and tribal identity. His family, his traditions, even his old ways of worship were left behind. This was truly an abandonment of his past. Land, family and inheritance were three of the most important elements in ancient societies. This call of God would mean leaving the many people and things that brought him great comfort. This was a huge risk to take. He was placing his survival, his identity, and his future security in God's hands.

Imagine a talk between Abraham and his father before he left Harran:

ABRAHAM: Father, you're not going to believe what happened to me!

TERAH: Oh, really, son. Tell me about it.

ABRAHAM: Well, I know there's a God greater than all gods! I've seen Him! He talked with me!

TERAH: Abraham, I told you to stay out of the wine cellar.

ABRAHAM: Yes, father. But I haven't been drinking. It's true. I've seen Him.

TERAH: Well, what in the world did He say?

ABRAHAM: It may sound strange, but He told me to pack up and leave.

TERAH: To do what?

ABRAHAM: To . . . to leave you and our family behind.

TERAH: Nonsense! You have been drinking!

ABRAHAM: No, it's true. It was no dream. I must obey, even though I don't know where this place is and I don't know much about this God.

TERAH: But you can't just go without knowing where you're headed!

ABRAHAM: God said He'd show me a new land, and I believe Him.

TERAH: Abraham, This is nonsense. You're sick. You must have a fever.

ABRAHAM: I'm not ill, and I'm not drunk. God promised He'd make me a great nation. Through me all the families of the earth would be blessed.

TERAH: Yeah, right.

But Abraham obeyed God. His faith was demonstrated by obedience. Not only does he go to Canaan, but he builds an altar to the Lord and worships. By building an altar he's saying, "This is my God," and not only that, he was saying, "This is his land. I'm staking it out for him." This was an act of faith. Faith is demonstrated by obedience. When Jesus said to his first disciples, "Follow me," that demanded obedience without which their faith would have been useless. And faith is hard because so often it doesn't make any sense on a human level. Martin Luther King said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

Some of you are being called right now to take a step of faith. I don't think God ever works in significant ways apart from this. One of the greatest ministry experiences I ever had came after I obeyed a call from God most people around me thought was foolish. I was in my junior year at Cal Poly and I'd given up playing football that season. At the end of the season I felt a clear call from God to play my senior season to share Christ with the guys on the team. At the time there was no visible witness for Christ going on there. But it was foolish for me to think the coaches would even let me back on the team, much less make a contribution on the field. I recall telling my coach why I'd really come back and he kind of looked at me like, "You must be kidding!" Well, not only did they let me back on the team, they let me start a bible study, and not only that, they let me share my testimony in a team meeting they called and required everyone to be at. By the end of the year, several guys had come to Christ and 40 guys were in our study.

God is still calling us today to take risky steps of faith. In a way, he tells us all to "Go" just as he told Abraham. Jesus said, "**Go and make disciples of all nations...**" (Matthew 28:19) This doesn't mean we're all called to leave our homes, but we're all part of God's plan to reach the nations. Two years ago, many of you took a big step of faith, left the Foster City Campus and started our South Campus. It was risky. It was uncomfortable. You stepped into the unknown, but look at what God has done. By his grace

you've built an altar in this part of the Peninsula. Why do this? God has told us as a church to step out in faith and hold on for the ride. But it doesn't stop there. Are you continuing to step out in risky faith to make disciples? Are you using your gifts? What area of your life do you need to step out in faith in obedience to God? What's holding you back? Is it fear of failure? Are you one who wants to have all your ducks in a row before you do anything? You're a planner, but you can't plan for the unknown.

### **Abraham's Faith was Sorely Tested**

What made it really hard for Abraham was this step of going was only the beginning. Every promise God made to him would eventually be seriously jeopardized. First, the promise of land. It says in verse 6 the Canaanites were in the land. That was a threat. That's why God reassures him with these words, "To your offspring I will give this land." But then later in the chapter there's a famine in the land and Abraham has to leave just to survive. By the way, that's also when Abraham passed his wife Sarah off as his sister to save his own skin. And then in chapter 13 we're told the land could no longer support both Lot and Abraham so Abraham allowed Lot to take his pick and Abraham got what was leftover. All of this testing of Abraham's faith had to do with the promise of land.

But then there was the promise of offspring. This was also jeopardized because Sarah was unable to have children. This issue will dominate much of the story. It first comes up in chapter 15:1-6. God appears to Abraham in a vision and says, "**Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.**" Then Abraham says, "**You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.**" That was the custom back then. Then God tells him to "**look up into the sky and count the stars, if indeed you can count them.**" And then God says, "**So shall your offspring be.**" Can you imagine that? That's a lot of babies! Before telescopes scientists could identify about 10,000 stars to the naked eye, but there were many more. Of course that was referring not just to his own children, but to his grandchildren and great grandchildren. Lynn and I were just at the birth of our second grandchild. I'd love to have 10,000 of those little guys! But imagine how hard it would be for Abraham to believe that. He and Sarah were close to 90 years old! But look what it says in verse 6, "**Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.**" That's one of the most important verses in the whole Bible. It shows us righteousness isn't something we earn. It's something credited to us the same way it was credited to Abraham, based on faith in God's promise. How do you and I gain the righteousness that makes us acceptable to God? Not through good works but through faith in Jesus.

Abraham's faith was sorely tested just as ours is. The Bible is full of God's promises to us. But the way God always works is to **not** give us the thing he's promised us right away. He loves to put the promise in jeopardy. He loves to make us wait. He loves to put

us in situations where the fulfillment seems impossible; where it is impossible apart from God. Why does he do that? Why does he work that way? Because God doesn't want us to trust in ourselves. Paul said of his own hardships, *"We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead"* (2 Corinthians 1:8b-9). If you're wondering why everything has to be so hard, there's the answer.

### **Abraham's Faithless Acts Didn't Nullify God's Faithfulness**

And in the midst of it, our faith often waivers, doesn't it? That was true for Abraham. After God's promise in chapter 15 he still had to wait ten more years for a child. In the meantime he tried to get it done another way. He and Sarah took matters into their own hands. They used Sarah's handmaid, Hagar, as a surrogate mother and she conceived. This is another lapse of faith in Abraham. Instead of trusting God to provide an heir he tried to manufacture his own, according to the customs of the day. Ishmael was born, but he wasn't to be the heir.

Finally, Sarah became pregnant and gave birth when Abraham was 100 years old. By the way, Abraham wasn't the only one with faith, Hebrews 11:11 says, *"And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise."* But her faith wasn't perfect either. Why do you think they called their son Isaac, which means laughter? In 17:17 when God told Abraham he'd have a son by Sarah it says, *"Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, 'Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?'"* Sarah was eavesdropping when God told Abraham that, and it says, *"So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?'"*

I love what Frederick Buechner says about this, "Why did the two old crocks laugh? They laughed because they knew only a fool would believe a woman with one foot in the grave was soon going to have her other foot in the maternity ward. They laughed because God expected them to believe it anyway. They laughed because God seemed to believe it. They laughed because they half-believed it themselves. They laughed because laughing felt better than crying. They laughed because if by some crazy chance it just happened to come true they would really have something to laugh about, and meanwhile it helped keep them going." And then he says, "Faith is laughter at the promise of a child called laughter."

Your faith and my faith will experience ups and downs. We'll have times when we laugh and doubt and go off and try to get it done on our own, which always ends in a disaster. But here's the deal: When you're faithless, God remains faithful. Your wavering faith won't nullify the faithfulness of God. And your faith will grow. Abraham's faith grew. It grew to the point where he was willing to obey God and sacrifice his son, Isaac. Why was he willing to do that? Because, as the writer of Hebrews wrote, he *"reasoned that God could even raise the dead..."* (Hebrews 11:19). So God is faithful when we're faithless and one of the things he's faithful to do is continue to develop and refine our faith. Faith is never a stagnant thing. God is committed to growing our faith so even in the roughest waters we know he's in charge, we know he's faithful, we know he can resurrect any situation at any time.

In a book called *True Religion*, Palmer Chinchin writes of how his brothers and he traveled to Zimbabwe to raft the Zambezi River. They boarded their raft at the base of the Victoria Falls. Massive amounts of water spilled over the top of the giant falls and dropped almost a thousand feet; the roar was deafening. The falls are the largest in the world, more than a mile wide and 300 feet high. Mist from the spray that filled the air like fog can be seen for 50 miles; the locals call it Smoke That Thunders. The water from the falls rushed down the gorge in torrents, creating the world's largest rapids. In the U.S., the highest-class rapid you're allowed to raft is a Class 5. The Zambezi's whitewater rapids can top 7 and 8.

He describes what happened, "As I sat on the edge of the eight-person raft, all suited up in a tight, overstuffed jacket and a thick crash helmet, I felt like an overcautious tourist about to mount an overpowered moped in Honolulu or rent roller-blades on Huntington Beach. The Zambezi can't be that dangerous, can it? But then our guide said, 'When the raft flips ...' There was no 'If the raft flips' .... But 'When the raft flips.' He went on, 'Stay in the rough water. You'll be tempted to swim toward the stagnate water at the edge of the banks. Don't do it. Because it's in the stagnate water the crocs wait for you. They're large and hungry. Even when the raft flips, stay in the rough water.'"

Stagnancy will kill your faith. We must resist stagnancy. God needs us out there in the rough waters, living by faith. That's where Abraham lived. That's where you and I are called to live. Live by faith in the whitewater where it's just a little bit uncertain and unsafe.

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

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