

# Abraham and the Steps of Faith

## *The Life of Abraham: Genesis 12-22 Sermon 3*

Genesis 12:1-20

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Two weeks ago, I mentioned how reading about the lives of others through their biographies has often been inspiring to me. In some cases, along with a biography, people leave us diaries or journals that end up being published. One's personal diary is often rawer than their biography—it opens a window onto the state of their soul at different times.

I can still remember coming upon the diary of David Brainerd when I was in seminary. Brainerd was born in 1718 and had been a missionary. I'd heard how his life had inspired so many Christians and that his personal journal was published. I checked it out from the library with excitement. But I was in for a sobering surprise. Some of the passages I read there shook me—greatly. Brainerd had entrusted his life to God, but, by his own account, his life was so often filled with uncertainty and extreme hardship.

He writes on September 2, 1746:

*Was scarce ever more confounded with a sense of my own unfruitfulness and unfitness of my work, than now. Oh, what a dead, heartless, barren, unprofitable wretch did I now see myself to be! My spirits were so low, and my bodily strength so wasted, that I could do nothing at all.... (423ff).*

In another entry, he describes the circumstances of his first mission station, where he was trying to share about Jesus with the Housatonic Tribe. He writes:

*I live poorly with regard to the comforts of life.... I lodge on a bundle of straw, and my labor is hard and extremely difficult; and I have little experience of success to comfort me (207).*

Then after just four years of work, Brainerd died of tuberculosis in the home of Jonathan Edwards. He was just 29 years old.<sup>1</sup>

I knew Brainerd's life and legacy had had an incalculable impact on Christian missionaries. I think it gave people a paradigm to see that God so often works through us, even when we feel weak and ineffective. But I was still very young in my faith at the time, and my heart recoiled from a truth I was coming to face: *the path of faith—though filled with meaning and a unique type of joy—was not at all a path leading away from trials. More often, it was a path that led straight towards them.*

I might have been less surprised by this if I'd better understood the life of Abraham. As far as we can tell, Abraham didn't keep a diary. But if he had, I could imagine there would have been passages that read similarly:

*Today marks ten years since Sarai and I set out toward God's promises. And here we are: we own not even an acre of this land, we are surrounded by Canaanites, and still no child. I grow older, and Sarai is far beyond the days of conceiving. I am so discouraged, so afraid (see Genesis 15:3; 17:1).*

*Or, It is God who led me into this land, and tonight several kings are arrayed against me—they've taken Lot, my nephew, hostage. They will likely kill him, then me (see Genesis 14:12-13).*

*Or, The Lord has shared with me His plans to execute judgement on the cities of Gomorrah and Sodom. I've asked Him to be merciful if even a few faithful are found there. Oh, how can I understand this God who is at once both over-flowing with mercy and also burns with holy righteousness? I am afraid (see Genesis 18:22-33).*

More often than not, Abraham did not understand God's ways nor God's timing. And Abraham—the mere mortal he is—, *how could he begin to comprehend the unfathomable God who he now followed?* Abraham's life had to be conducted according to this singularly important spiritual muscle: *faith*.

Faith is not a quaint idea for those who go off to study theology. Faith is the very thing one lives by when called to follow God. Faith is to the spiritual life what the heart is to the physical life—it is the

organ that sits behind the working of every other faculty: prayer, obedience, generosity, hope, love—these Christian virtues can only exist if the organ of faith remains pumping.

*Do you know the role that faith plays in your life? Do you understand how it comes about, what it's like to live by it, or why God requires it of us?* Paul says that we must learn “to walk in the footsteps of the faith that our Father Abraham had” (Romans 4:12). Turning again to the calling and commissioning of Abraham in Genesis 12, we can now consider how Abraham responds—he responds in faith—and how this unfolds will help us better understand what faith looks like for us. We'll consider (1) the breaking down, (2) the building up, (3) and the altar of faith.

## I. The Breaking Down

The first thing to notice is that the faith of Abraham begins with a *breaking down*. In verse 1, God spells out what responding to him will require, and it involves a departure, a leaving, a breaking down of the life Abraham formally knew:

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” (12:1).

For Abraham, going requires leaving; a beginning starts with an ending. And notice the threefold emphasis: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house” (12:1).<sup>2</sup>

To leave one’s family in the ancient world was unthinkable. It was to cut ties with all that was familiar and safe. And bound up in what God is asking of Abraham is his departure from an entire way of being in the world. Coming from the area of Babylon, Abraham’s country and kin represent traditions he would have leaned on meaning, belief systems there for coherence. There was a language and customs. And there was a religious system replete with temples and priests, omens and oracles. Abraham’s culture has shaped his inner life—how he thought, what he valued, and how he prayed and hoped. In order to follow God, this former way of life had to be broken down. There are several insights to be drawn from this verse:

### **All believe**

First, it reminds us that we always have *some* type of faith. Abraham is going from a man of pure reason to a man of faith—he’s “changing his faith.”

Some people today think we can choose between a life based on facts and a life based on faith—but this is simply not so. Life presents us with too many questions that science can’t answer. If you are going to live a life of meaning and coherence, you’ll need more than math and physics. Popular views such as the dignity of all human beings aren’t supported by evolutionary determinism or the Big Bang Theory—they are *beliefs*.

Tolstoy, during his mid-life crisis of soul-searching, wrote that:

It is impossible for there to be a person with no religion ... as it is for there to be a person without a heart. He may not know that he has a religion, just as a person may not know that he has a heart, but it is no more possible for a person to exist without a religion than without a heart.<sup>3</sup>

## Hybrid-religion

Second, that the building of biblical faith requires the breaking down of a former faith also cautions us to consider carefully what faith we hold. Well into the Promised Land, Abraham may have still had a lot of Babylon in him—he may have been tempted at times to count the stars or listen to the wind.

Many Christians today may be living based on a *hybrid-faith*: half Christianity, half American dream; half Jesus, half political party; half gospel, half self-help-ism. For all of us, it’s important to ask—and ask often—if the structure of our belief (our faith) is built from Jesus and his first followers, or if it’s brought with it a system of belief constructed by the world.

So with Abraham stripped down to the studs, we can now ask what happens to build up a new faith—a biblical faith in the one true God.

## II. The Building Up

In verses 5-9, Abraham journeys through what will come to be called the Promised Land, from north to south. And in this and what follows in the ensuing chapters, we will see that faith is something that

unfolds and develops in real time and real life—not just mental ponderings. And Abraham’s faith must develop in many ways.

## School of faith

Biblical commentator Bruce Waltke speaks of Abraham and the “School of Faith,” and says that “The plot [of Genesis 12-25] is driven by Abraham’s struggle to trust God in the face of a series of conflicts testing his faith.”<sup>4</sup>

Consider some of the tests of faith Abraham will endure. He must: trust in God’s promise of descendants despite childlessness; trust in the face of a famine that comes once he’s in the Promised Land (12:10); trust as a sojourner in a hostile land—“At that time the Canaanites were in the land” (12:7); trust in the face of conflict with his nephew, Lot (Genesis 13); trust when he must go to war with foreign kings because of his nephew’s capture (Genesis 14); and trust when God asks him to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22).

Amid this school of testing, Waltke imagines the elementary, college, and graduate stages of faith.

**Elementary:** At first, faith simply becomes open to the reality that God is there: Abraham hears God.

**College:** Along the way, however, faith must learn to obey God, to live according to His promises even when it’s hard: there are seasons when you’re tested, but by and large you can still make sense of what God is up to.

**Graduate school:** Graduate school, however, is when God calls you to radical obedience. This is Abraham being asked to sacrifice Isaac.<sup>5</sup> Here, the act of faith exhaust all understanding—you cannot see why God is asking this of you, you simply trust *Him*.

There is also much to learn from the way Abraham’s faith is built.

## Faith develops by doing

First, faith is not built in a vacuum—but through *going, doing, and obeying*. Sometimes we think that building faith requires more thinking. Thinking is important, but so is acting.

Imagine you're on an airplane for the first time, sitting on the tarmac. And the person next to you is telling you about the laws of aerodynamics. You're not quite convinced. Then she says, "okay, the plane is going to take off, and now you'll *be living* the reality of aerodynamics." We need to get going praying, obeying, and worshiping God in order to really activate the life of faith.

## **Faith involves the head and heart**

We can also see from Abraham that faith involves the whole person in terms of both head and heart. Faith is a mental belief in the One True God, an understanding of His Word, but it is also a heart that trusts in Him. And the real challenge to faith is often more in the emotions than intellect.

C. S. Lewis explains this so well:

Supposing a man's reason once decides that the weight of the evidence is for [Christianity]. I can tell that man what is going to happen to him in the next few weeks. There will come a moment when there is bad news, or he is in trouble, or is living among a lot of other people who do not believe it, and all at once his emotions will rise up and carry out a sort of blitz on his belief.

I am not talking of moments at which any real new reasons against Christianity turn up.... I am talking about moments when a mere mood rise up against it.

"Faith is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods," Lewis concludes.<sup>6</sup>

This is why your local church and your Christian friend group are so important. Abraham was so often totally alone in his faith walk. But God does not intend for us to be. Whether it's doubt in your head or in your heart, an individual's faith is meant to be buoyed up by her sisters and brothers in Christ.

## **Faith, like a muscle, develops against the pressure of testing and time**

It's not that Abraham doesn't have faith in Genesis 12; it's just that his faith has grown and deepened by Genesis 22. As one commentator puts it,

The universe might be made in seven days, but anything in the human world that involves profound change, takes time. The biblical drama is set in the arena of time. Faith is the ability to live with delay without losing trust in the promise; to experience disappointment without losing hope, to know that the road between the real and the ideal is long and yet be willing to undertake the journey.<sup>7</sup>

Faith is like a craft we learn, a muscle we develop—and this only happens against the pressure of time and testing. There is a third feature of Abraham's faith to notice: *faith requires an altar to cry out from*.

### III. An Altar to Cry Out From

I find it moving and profound that prior to possessing even an acre of the Promised Land, Abraham builds altars there. And he does so in the vicinity of Canaanite religious sites:

Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him (Genesis 12:6-7).

Again, as Abraham moves southward to the hill country of Bethel, "there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD" (Genesis 12:8).

Let us picture Abraham now. He is in a lonely and foreign land, surrounded by a people he does not know. There is the famine that comes in 12:10; the use of his wife as a pawn in 12:10-20; and the times when he will question God. There is fear within, and without—and so much cause for doubt when he thinks of his age and barrenness.

And yet here—in this place—Abraham starts to pick up large stones and assembles them as an altar. He does not bow at the Canaanite shrine. No. He kneels before the God who has called him. And, in

what seems like a word of defiance against both his doubts and the Canaanites, we read in v. 8, “Abraham called upon the name of the LORD” (12:8).

I wonder what it sounded like: *Elohim! Elohim!* I picture him kneeling. In the Bible, one’s faith is often understood in the context of a covenant—a relationship established by God with an individual or a people. This relationship is at times likened to a marriage.

Abraham is not alone with his faith—it is not faith in a philosophy, ideology, or nation—it is faith *in God*. And as he cries out to the Lord before that altar, the crucial element of biblical faith is hinted at:

**Abraham’s faith is, ultimately, a trust in the faithfulness of God.  
Our faith grows in the soil of God’s faithfulness to keep His promises.**

And when read in light of Jesus Christ, we understand just how far God will go in remaining faithful to us, even when we are not able to remain faithful to Him.

This is a faith that upholds us not only in life but in death. Abraham will not see the fulfillment of all of God’s promises in his lifetime—they are for his offspring and will be given to Abraham in the future. When Abraham and Sarah die, all they possess of the Promised Land is a small field where they are buried.

And so too David Brainard died owning nothing of this world, and his life is marked only by a gravestone in Northampton, MA. It’s a dark slab now well worn, which reads:

*Sacred to the memory of the Rev. David Brainerd. A faithful and laborious missionary to the Stockbridge, Delaware and Susquehanna tribes of Indians died in this town. October 10, 1747.*

His last words written in his diary were these:

*My soul was this day, at turns, sweetly set on God: I longed to be with him, that I might behold his glory. I felt sweetly disposed to commit all to him, even my dearest friends, my dearest flock, my absent brother, and all my concerns for time and eternity. O that his*



*kingdom might come in the world; that they might all love and glorify him, for what he is in himself; and that that blessed Redeemer might "see of the travail of his soul, and be satisfied! Oh, come, Lord Jesus, come quickly! Amen.*

Faith is that silver tether tying our heart to God's—whereby we believe, until our dying hour, that He is good, and keeps His promise—even His promise to keep us.

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## Endnotes

1. The above quotes from Brainard's journal are cited in John Piper, *David Brainerd: May I Never Loiter On My Heavenly Journey!* (Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2012).
2. Notice the way the King James version puts it. Instead of "go," it's worded: "Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee" (Genesis 12:1).
3. Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings* (Penguin Books, 1987).
4. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis*, 197ff.
5. Of course, God has no intention of letting Abraham go through with this. But in an ancient world where many people *did* sacrifice their sons and daughters—and did so to false Gods—the true God needed to stretch his man's faith to that stature. And the reader of Genesis finds that at this point—in Genesis 22—Abraham's faith has grown. As the writer of Hebrews puts it: "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, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back" (Hebrews 11:17-19).
6. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 140.

7. Jonathan Sacks, *Genesis: The Book of Beginnings* (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union: 2009), 92-93.