

ROBUST FAITH: Sermons from Abraham

I. “Leaving”

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SCRIPTURE: Genesis 11:27-12:9

Text: *By faith Abraham, when called... obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going* (Heb 11:8).

SERIES INTRODUCTION

“I wish I had more faith!” Have you said that? I’m sure we all have. Last week, the cover story of *Time* magazine was titled, “The Secret Life of Mother Teresa,” followed by the subtitle, “Newly published letters reveal a beloved icon’s 50-year crisis of faith.” Well, to refer to her struggles as a “crisis of faith” really shows a huge misunderstanding of Biblical faith.

These letters were written over 60 years to her spiritual advisors and confidants. She asked that these letters be destroyed at her death, so I have ethical concerns over her express desires being ignored. Nevertheless, these letters are being printed for the world to see. In these letters, Mother Teresa reveals a sense of being abandoned by God as she worked among the dying in the slums of Calcutta. Her work there began after 17 years as a teacher in Calcutta. Then, at age 36, Christ spoke to her and called her to abandon teaching and work instead in the slums of the city, dealing directly with “the poorest of the poor”—the sick, the dying, the beggars and street children. Jesus told her, “Come, come, carry Me into the holes of the poor. Come be my light.” Mother Teresa did just that. For 50 years, she waded in the worst squalor of her day—mainly picking up the dying off the streets, people abandoned—to take them into her shelter so they could die with dignity with clean sheets and love. And, to her spiritual advisors, she confessed she sometimes doubts God, and laments the lack of feeling His presence. And, she was depressed.

Should we be surprised? When you wrestle with the forces of darkness and the ultimate enemy, death, daily immersed in the rawest and most awful human suffering with practically everyone you help dying, does faith mean feeling the warmth of God’s presence around you daily? Does it mean never wondering why God doesn’t do more to alleviate suffering? Mother Teresa wrote to her spiritual advisor, “I accept, not in my feelings— but with my will, the Will of God— I accept His will.”

Some are using this to question the validity of religion and the existence of God. That only reveals a lack of understanding of the journey of faith. The very essence of faith is:

- believing in spite of the absence of evidence,
- believing in spite of the absence of feelings.
- It has to do with marrying the invisible to the visible.
- It is trusting God is in control in the messiness and chaos of our broken world.
- It is not a disposition of the “inner life.”

- It can include doubt.
- It is an obedient life, following the call of God, knowing that beyond our feelings and doubts and depression, we are part of something we'll never see— something vast beyond our time horizon— the kingdom of God.

And, in this sense, Mother Teresa brings us into the tough realities of Biblical faith.

Abraham is the great Biblical model of the life of faith. In Romans, Paul upholds him as the model, the prototype of faith. Hebrews great faith chapter begins with,

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Heb 11:1).

Then it lists 19 Old Testament persons who are powerful examples of this faith. Abraham gets the most coverage by far, one third more than the next closest rival, Moses.

One of the best ways to understand what it means to live by faith is to immerse ourselves in this story of Abraham. At the end of his story is the amazing example of faith with the willingness to sacrifice Isaac. At that point, we see a trust in God that boggles our minds. But the journey there is marked by doubt, failure, and much growth. In Abraham, I hope we will discover for ourselves what it means to trust God in the rough and tumble of real life— faith not as a system of belief but as a *way* of life, a way commanded by God.

We don't learn to walk by studying how to walk. We just begin trying, and eventually get the feel of it. Likewise, we don't learn to golf by studying it— it is by doing. We learn to live by faith in much the same way— by doing. But, the real life adventures of Abraham provide inspiration and important clues to help us in our practice of living by faith.

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 11:27-12:9

(Abram's name is later changed to Abraham, as we'll see. I'll probably be using them interchangeably out of habit).

LEAVE

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. (Gen 12:1)

The story begins with God's command to leave where Abram is and go *to the land I will show you*. Then, following God's promise, we read:

Abram left (4), *they set out* (5), *traveled through the land* (6), *went on* (8), and *set out* (9).

Hebrews begins the example of Abram with these words, *By faith Abraham, when called... obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going* (Heb 11:8). And, note that this leaving is total— a triple renunciation— *your country, your people and your father's household*. Between these introductory words and the climactic end of Abraham's story, we will have 16 verbs for walking and traveling.

The faith journey always begins with leaving. We can think of Jesus' call to disciples. Peter, Andrew, James, and John all left their fishing boats and nets. Matthew left his tax collecting booth. And, we remember Jesus' call to some who were not willing to leave family, land, or

possessions behind. The word with which the life of discipleship begins, “repent,” means literally, in the Greek, to turn around and go in a new direction. That, of course, means leaving behind the old journey, the old way of life.

The earliest name given to believers in the New Testament were those belonging to “The Way” (Acts 9:2), as with Jesus defining Himself as “The Way” (Jn. 14:6). As these believers gathered together, they referred to themselves as “the church.” The Greek word they chose for this is *ecclesia*, which literally means “the called out ones.” It was adapted from the Greek of that day that referred to those sent on a mission. When there was a special mission, a task to be done, a herald would call people out of a town to be commissioned for a special role. These were the *ecclesia*– “the called out ones.” So, in applying this word to themselves, these early Christians clearly understood that being the church meant leaving on a special journey commissioned by the Master.

But leaving the secure, the known, the familiar is hard– especially when we don’t know exactly what we’re getting into. From what Scripture tells us, it is clear that Abraham struggled with this call. The leaving was not clear-cut in the beginning. And here we see some lessons for us.

THE BEGINNING OF RECOVERY

Genesis means “beginning.” Actually there are three beginnings in these first 11 chapters. **First**, there is the original creation and the human race’s rapid descent into sin and rebellion following the fall. We’re not told much about that antediluvian world, but the degradation and depravity of the human heart cannot be missed. Then **second**, God sent the flood as judgment, and to get a fresh start. But soon things have gone bad again and we have the scattering of people at the Tower of Babel. Now, we have the **third** start, as God begins His plan of recovering the human race and the earth. It all begins with the call of Abraham through whom God will form His chosen people, Israel, to be a light to the nations, bring forth the Messiah, and redeem humanity.

Abraham started out as an idolater like most of the rest of humanity in that day (Josh. 24:3). Certainly there must have been some true followers of God in that day, but Abraham was not one of them. The main god of both Ur and Haran, archaeological digs reveal, was the moon god. In fact, the names Terah, Laban, Sarah, and Milcah are all names commonly associated with this cult. Ziggurats were part of this idolatry. While not nearly as massive as the pyramids of Egypt, nonetheless, at six or seven stories high, they were still impressive. At the time of Abraham, about 2000 B.C., Ur was a rather advanced civilization with detailed law codes. Stephen, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in his sermon before being stoned, adds these details:

The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'

"So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. (Acts 7:2-4)

The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham. Yes, while he was still immersed in the idolatrous religion of his culture, God took the initiative and chose him. As with Abraham, we

too are chosen, a theme frequently used by Paul—

...from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. (2 Thess 2:13)

We are told nothing of this revelation, but it was enough to get Abraham moving, beginning his journey. Now here, we have to do a bit of reading between the lines. The end of Gen. 11 sounds like Abram's father, Terah took the initiative in the move from Ur to Haran. But then, chapter 12 uses the past tense to refer to Abram's call, "had said," so we surmise, confirmed by Stephen in Acts, the call came to Abram and he then shared it with his extended family. So Abram and Sarai went, taking along his father's and nephew Lot's families. And, in a single line, the major problem to the fulfillment of God's plans in the promise is stated: *Now Sarai was barren; she had no children* (Gen 11:30). So, God has chosen an infertile couple through which to bring forth His nation— a human impossibility.

HALFWAY

Abram and Sarai got halfway to Canaan and stopped at Haran. Up to this point, the journey had been up the fertile Euphrates valley. But this was the jumping off point for the journey across the desert to Canaan, leaving civilization as he knew it. Did his heart and flesh fail at that daunting prospect? We don't know what happened, only that they stopped there for perhaps 15 years. Abram's father, Terah may have had something to do with it, for it's after Terah dies at age 205, the call is renewed. Maybe Terah refused to go further and Abram wasn't willing to leave him. As often happens, death opens up new dimensions for the living, perhaps greater willingness to follow God with a fresh sense of what is eternal. At this point, the call comes again to Abram, now with a promise. God is wonderfully patient, giving them a second chance.

This journey of faith is perilous and intimidating at times. Do you remember those lines from The Lord of the Rings where Frodo cries,

"I am not made for perilous quests. I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?"

"Such questions cannot be answered," said Gandalf. "You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess; not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have."

When we feel the "danger" of God's call, we easily fall prey to one of Satan's favorite ploys. The temptation to remain where you are, blend in, and not get too radical in this leaving business. He whispers to us, "You don't really need to separate yourself from your former way of life. You can follow God in your heart. It's what's in your heart that counts." In C. S. Lewis's Screwtape Letters, the senior devil, Screwtape, advises his underling in handling his "patient," to urge him to moderation. He says, "A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all—and far more amusing." Mediocre commitment will always lack the zest and thrill of adventure and will never be attractive to others. The lukewarmness of the Laodicians, God warns, will result them being spit out of his mouth (Rev. 3:16). Very soon, half-hearted, easy commitment drifts into little or no commitment.

When Rev. Will Willamon, a popular Christian conference speaker, was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, he got a call from a VERY upset father. His daughter who had been accepted in graduate school had just called to inform him she was not going to graduate school, but going to do mission work for the Presbyterians in Haiti for the next year. “Isn’t that absurd!” shouted the father. “A B.S. in mechanical engineering from Duke and she’s going to dig ditches in Haiti. **I hold you** personally responsible for this!” Will responded with, “Well, I doubt that she’s received much training in ditch-digging in the engineering department, but she’s probably a fast learner and will get the hang of it.” “Look,” the father said, “this is no laughing matter. You are irresponsible to have encouraged her to do this.” Will went on to point out that her parents were *really* the ones who started the ball rolling. They were the ones who had her baptized, read Bible stories to her, took her to Sunday School and church, and let her ski in Vail with the youth group. Will ended with, “You’re the one who introduced her to Jesus, not me.” The conversation ended with the father meekly saying, “But all we ever wanted her to be was a Presbyterian.”

If you’ve ever responded to an altar call for salvation or deeper commitment, you are familiar with all the arguments for halfway. And, as you rose to leave your seat in response to God’s call, that journey forward seemed daunting—leaving behind your place, your friends or family—for God’s call and a promise. Once you started, you knew life could never be the same again. Of course, altar calls are not the only way we respond. There are many other ways and times God calls us to follow Him in a new and deeper way. BUT, it always involves leaving something behind. Bonhoeffer is insightful:

“To stay in the old situation makes discipleship impossible.... Tear yourself away from all other attachments and follow Him.... The strong point which the refractory sinner had occupied must be stormed, for in it Christ cannot be heard. The truant must be dragged from the hiding place which he has built for himself. Only then can he recover the freedom to see, hear, and believe.”

We live in what could be called a “both and” culture. We add things, but seldom forsake anything. Our lives get clogged and cluttered. With iPods, we take our music libraries with us. Blackberries enable people to always be in touch, and never really leave work. With cell phones we are always connected. We want to lose weight without giving up anything—just take a pill or something. Do you know what a “flexitarian” is? It is vegetarian who isn’t fully committed. Yes, I’ve read that this is for real. It is a real term. As Christy, a 28-year-old flexitarian said, “I usually eat vegetarian. But I really like sausage.” She’s what’s called a “flexitarian.”

I’m afraid our Christian commitment can look the same way. We say “Yes” to following Jesus, but keep all the old contacts and lifestyle. We don’t leave that relationship that is dishonoring to the Lord and against Scripture’s clear teaching. Like Joseph, we must flee Potiphar’s wife. Don’t argue with temptation, you’ll lose. The Bible tells us to flee, get away (2 Tim. 2:22)! We are called to flee from the love of money, greed, and the materialism of this world’s system. But, we like to our options open, not closing doors. We rationalize, “In my case it’s different. The Lord knows my heart. I don’t need to cut this off. I can still follow Jesus and....” We need to hear again Paul’s injunction in 2 Cor. 6:14 & 17—

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.... Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord.

The life of discipleship always demands separation from sin, from the world, and from anything that would hold us back in fully obeying Christ— even good things that get in our way. Of course, that doesn't mean we go off and live in separate little enclaves. We do live in this world, but are not of the world. In reality, when we hear the call of Christ, what we are to do is not confusing. It is only our rationalizations that begin to blur the lines. As we pray and as we surrender our hearts completely to the Lord, we know. We know the company we shouldn't keep. We know the TV programs and movies we shouldn't watch. We know the computer sites we should not visit. We know the places we should not go. We know the things we shouldn't be dabbling in. We know what we shouldn't be spending money on. We know...

But, it is not just leaving we must do. It is embracing the call and journey we are being led on. It means engaging in new things, incorporating a whole new way of life. It means going into the world to share the Good News of God's love in word and deed. It is a life-long adventure in following Jesus.

CONCLUSION

There's a song written by Michael Card that has in it the refrain:

“It's hard to imagine the freedom we find
from the things we leave behind.”

He refers to Simon Peter and Matthew and making Jesus our only possession. Then, this verse:

“Every heart needs to be set free,
from possessions that hold it so tight
'Cause freedom's not found in the things that we own,
It's the power to do what is right.
Jesus, our only possession, giving becomes our delight.

Oh, and it's hard to imagine
the freedom we find
from the things we leave behind.”

Review the spiritual geography of your life this morning. Ur was the place of idolatry. The essence of idolatry is trying to get God to do what we want— to control or manipulate Him or make God into who we want Him to be. God calls us to leave all that behind and enter into an exclusive relationship with Him alone. He wants to be all we desire and need. It means forsaking all else that competes for our ultimate allegiance: family, friends, the good life, the secure and familiar. Haran was halfway. Maybe you've begun the journey, but let Christ into only part of your life and there are many “withholds.” Maybe you feel too entangled with things, busyness, fragmented, pulled by all kinds of other commitments.

Like Abraham, leave the old ways you had of coping. Leave the country dominated by self. Embark on the adventure of doing God's will with your whole heart. You'll enter the promised land of God's unconditional love, and care for us— and the thrill of a commission of being a part

of bringing forth the will of God and the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Oh, and it's hard to imagine
the freedom we find
from the things we leave behind.

Prayer:

Your call, God, puts us in motion.
Show us how to find the meaning of our lives,
not in holding on but in letting go,
not in trying to carve out a niche for ourselves
but in taking the journey you command.
We pray in the name of Jesus who calls us to Himself.