

“The Faith of Abraham”

Genesis 12:1-9

May 9, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

In our 13 week survey of the Old Testament, we come today to the very important story of Abraham. It's important that we read his story in the context of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. God created the world to be a place where men and women would flourish as they multiply and rule the earth as God's image bearers. But Adam and Eve renounced God's right to rule over their lives and launched instead into a program of self-rule. As a result, paradise was lost, and Adam and Eve had to leave the Garden and the Tree of Life in its center. But God did not give up on his world. He told Adam and Eve that there would be conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, and the seed of the woman would prevail. There was hope in God's promise to fight evil.

But as the story unfolds in Genesis 4-11, the hope announced in Genesis 3:15 grows dim. We saw last week in Genesis 4 how Cain turns out to be of the seed of the serpent, while Abel is of the seed of the woman. But the seed of the woman doesn't prevail at all. He is murdered by the seed of the serpent. What's more, it is Cain's seed that flourishes and spreads over the earth, with the result that evil spreads over the face of the earth. Things get so bad eventually that God's only option for the rescue of his world is to step in with the judgment of the Great Flood. All of the seed of the serpent are wiped out and God starts over with righteous Noah and his children. Like the fresh start of a new semester of school, where hopes are high for a better outcome than the previous semester, we think that surely things will be better this time. But it doesn't turn out that way. As the sons of Noah multiply, again it is those who turn out to be the seed of the serpent that proliferate. Eventually, their defiance of God takes the form of building a tower in order to make great their own name. Once again, God has to intervene with a judgment that will stop this quick decline of the human race. He does so this second time, not by another flood, but by dividing the languages at Babel. Now those who are of the seed of the serpent will no longer be able to unify in their opposition to God.

This is where Abraham comes into the story. After the division of languages at Babel, God narrows his work of redemption to one man. He engages in a work of new creation with Abraham that is just as significant as his original work of creation. God has not given up on his purpose to bless the world, but he makes it clear that he will now do so through Abraham and his seed. Genesis is a book about origins (the name *Genesis* means origins). The story of Abraham shows us for the first time that the central feature of God's people, the seed of the woman, is to be faith. Later biblical authors refer back to

Abraham as a man of faith. All the children of Abraham, which the Bible says is not restricted to those who are Jews racially, are to be like their father, Abraham, in this regard. We are called to be people of faith. That lies at the heart of who we are. If you are a Christian, you are to be a man or woman of faith. Note three features of the faith of Abraham, which features are to describe the faith of all God's people.

I. The Object of Faith – God's Promise

When God came to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldeans, Abraham was an idolater, just like everyone else in his family. But God did something of immense power—he spoke. The God who spoke the universe into existence, who said, “Let there be light”, and there was light, spoke to Abraham. He spoke words of promise, and it was enough to make Abraham a new creation. Faith comes as we hear and believe the promises made to us by God.

Let's look a little more carefully at these promises. Notice that God makes four promises to Abraham: a land, a people, a blessing and becoming a blessing to all the families of the earth. The rest of the Bible outlines three fulfillments of these promises: one in the nation of Israel during Old Testament times, a second fulfillment in the church, and finally one in eternity. For example, God promised Abraham, **“I will make of you a great nation.”** The first fulfillment of that was in a literal way in the growth of the nation during their time in Egypt. We read of them in Exodus 1:7, **“But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.”** But then we see that God's promises are much bigger than Abraham could have known, because there is a second fulfillment of this promise in the church. In Galatians 3:7-8, Paul expands our view of exactly who the children of Abraham are. **“Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’”** That means that everyone who believes in Jesus is part of this great nation springing from Abraham. But there's still one more fulfillment of this found at the end of the Bible. Listen to this language in Revelation 7 and see if you can pick up an allusion to Genesis 12. **“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes”** (v. 7). God had told Abraham that he would be the father of a multitude too numerous to number (Gen. 15:5), and Rev. 7:7 uses that same language. So these promises are fulfilled in the nation of Israel, in the church, and in eternity. The remainder of the Bible is the story of how God goes about fulfilling these promises.

Note something very important about these promises—they are unconditional. God simply comes to this idol worshiper in Ur and announces that he is going to bless him. So far in the book of Genesis, God’s response to sin has been to curse. He cursed the serpent, the ground, the childbearing process of the woman, Cain, the evil people living in the days of Noah, and those at the tower of Babel. But now he comes and speaks a word of blessing, not to one who had earned the blessing, but simply and purely out of God’s grace. Abraham wasn’t chosen by God because he was genetically predisposed to righteousness. As a matter of fact, we see at the end of this chapter that he fell into significant sin when he was willing to sacrifice his wife in order to avoid trouble with Pharaoh. It would not be the last time Abraham would fall. But God had spoken his word of blessing and grace, and Abraham believed him.

Everything changed in Abraham’s life as he believed God. For example, we read in chapter 11 of those at Babel who were trying to make a name for themselves (11:4). They were dispersed and all their names lost. Abraham has a great name, not because he sought it, but because God promised it. The ones who worked very hard for a great name did not get it, and the one who got it did nothing other than believe God’s promise.

These verses remind us that our central duty as God’s people is to believe God’s word. We are people of the word. Bruce Waltke says that “Christians are people of the ear, not of the eye.” What would faith in the promises of God look like in your life right now? I like what John Calvin says about verse 1, where God told Abraham to leave his country and go to another country God would show him. “Whosoever, therefore, he requires anything of us, we must not be so solicitous about success, as to allow fear and anxiety to retard our course. For it is better, with closed eyes, to follow God as our guide, than, by relying on our own prudence, to wander through those circuitous paths which it devises for us.” He reminds us in these comments that one of the things faith looks like is to be rid of fear and anxiety, close our eyes and follow the voice of God.

II. The Feel of Faith - Weakness

But what does this faith feel like? The striking thing about Abraham’s faith is that it felt like weakness, not power. Note that God told him to move to a land that “I will show you.” Abraham had to pick up and move without knowing where he was going. Can’t you hear some of the conversations Sarah must have had as she was saying goodbye to all her friends and relatives? They would ask her, “So why are you leaving?” “Well, Abraham said that God told him to leave.” “Now, where is it that you’re going?” “Well, we don’t exactly know. God just told us that he would tell us when we got there.” It also must have felt like weakness because he was going to a foreign country, a place where he lacked the connections a person has when he’s in his own land. What’s more, he wouldn’t have known the language at first. Have you ever been

in a foreign country without a knowledge of the language commonly spoken there? It makes one feel very weak and vulnerable.

Illustration: I have a friend from seminary who served as a missionary in the African country of Ghana. Like most missionaries he began by studying the language. Listen to his description of something that happened early on Christmas morning not long after he arrived in Ghana.

As we gleefully prepared to open up our little pile of Christmas presents, a neighbor rode up to the house on his bicycle with his wife in tow. They'd come for a very unexpected and very early Christmas visit. We welcomed them into the living room, exchanged some basic greetings and then sat in dumb silence for thirty minutes. They don't speak English and we, in spite of months of study, couldn't generate any Christmas morning conversation in the Debi language. I heaved a sigh of relief when the husband finally begged permission to go (the customary way of taking leave here in northern Ghana) but was shaken by the experience.

Another example of the way Abraham's faith felt like weakness is found in verse 6: **"At that time, the Canaanites were in the land."** Have you ever gone to a new place on vacation, and after spending hours on the road in eager anticipation of the glorious place of your destination, you finally get there only to be extremely disappointed. The beach house that looked so good on the rental brochure smells musty, is coated with sand, has a flea-infestation, and the air conditioner doesn't work. Imagine arriving there, however, and discovering that you have just rented a home occupied by someone else. That was Abraham's experience here. Throughout his lifetime, he would never own any of this land other than his own burial plot.

Note also that Abraham's life of faith took him into suffering. There are at least four moves in these verses: from Ur to Haran, Haran to Canaan, and then two moves within Canaan. Given the difficulty inherent in moving such a large contingent as Abraham's, the most likely explanation for these moves in Canaan is the hostility of the Canaanites. The land also seemed susceptible to famines, forcing him to flee to Egypt for his survival. On top of all this, there was the barrenness of his wife. Abraham's name, which means father of a multitude, seemed to mock him. His aging wife had been barren from the beginning of their marriage. This was even more significant in his culture, where family was far more important than values like money and success. Abraham lived a life of suffering, and we learn from this fact that suffering is a normal part of a life of faith. In my 30 years as a pastor, I have never had anyone say to me or even in my hearing, "Some of the most significant lessons in my life have come as a result of comfort and ease." Suffering is a part of faith.

III. The Result of Faith – Mission

God told Abraham that he would bless him and make him a blessing. Notice the important purpose clause of verse 2. **“I will bless you..., so that you will be a blessing.”** God’s blessings are always intended to lead us to serve and bless others. This doesn’t mean that all Christians are to pursue missions as a vocation. It does mean that a life of faith leads inevitably to a life of loving service. A missionary is a sent one, and God sends those who have been blessed by Jesus to go and be a blessing to others. This requires that we see all of life, not just our volunteer work for the church, as that of missions. For example, our daughter Meredith started out in college as a piano major. She enjoyed playing the piano by herself, but found that whenever she played for others, she got so nervous that she was unable to play very well. After many attempts to conquer this, I encouraged her to consider the fact that perhaps God was calling her to some area of service other than piano. I came to that conclusion based on the reasoning of this passage. God blesses us in order that we might be a blessing to others. God didn’t intend on her spending all her time playing the piano only for her own enjoyment, but for others.

So a life of faith is a life in mission. Such a life will often require of us the same thing it required of Abraham. He had to leave his home and country, the area where he felt safe and secure (his comfort zone), and venture forth in a great adventure that involved significant risk and constant change. It also involved a loss of two things that mean a great deal to most of us—control and comfort. This is the missional life to which God calls us.

CONCLUSION:

To be a Christian is to be a child of Abraham, and to be a child of Abraham is to be a man or woman of faith. Such faith brings blessing and gives blessing. What is this blessing, though, that is mentioned repeatedly throughout this passage? When God says that he will bless Abraham, what does that mean exactly? And what does it mean to bless others? Does it just involve a general politeness in which we hold doors for people and let drivers in line in front of us? One of my favorite benedictions in the Bible helps answer this question. It is the old benediction that God himself gave to Israel’s first high priest, Aaron, and one that is very familiar to our church. **“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you”** (Num. 6:25). To be blessed by the Lord is to have his face shining upon you. What does that mean? The shining face is the smiling face. We have a similar saying in English. We say of the groom at his wedding that his face was just beaming. We mean that he was smiling. How do we get the Lord to smile at us? We don’t, because Jesus has already done so. We rest in Jesus, the friend of sinners. We bless others by showing them this same Jesus.