

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

Abraham's First Steps of Faith (Genesis 12:4-9)

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I love the passage that before us this morning because it illustrates in such a beautiful way God's dealings with believers in their spiritual infancy, when they are taking their first steps of faith in response to the gospel. In the opening verses of chapter 12, God has proclaimed good news to Abraham. He has told Abraham plainly that He will be his God; that He will bless him and make His name great; that He will make of him a great nation; that he will be a blessing to others; and that in him all the families of the earth will be blessed. Abraham believed God's promises, and through faith in those promises, he was willing to undertake a journey that God commanded him to take. That journey involved leaving his father's house and everything that was familiar to him, in order to go to a far distant land that God would show him.

Now, by calling Abraham to undertake this journey, God was not suggesting that he somehow had to earn by his own obedience to God, the blessings which God had just pronounced on him. He was not suggesting that God's promises to Abraham would be obtained through the merit of his own works. Perish the thought! You will not find a single word in this passage that suggests Abraham had to earn the favor of God or the blessing of God by works of any kind; no, God's blessing were entirely gracious and could not be earned by any performance; they could only be received by faith. Nevertheless, Abraham was to demonstrate the reality of his faith by obeying God. He was to show forth by His works that He really did trust in the promises of God. In this we see a characteristic feature of faith that is true in every age. If faith is genuine, it will always result in action. That's why the apostle James tells us that it is not enough simply to say that we believe. We must show that we believe by our works. In Abraham's case, that meant getting up and leaving his father's house and going to the land which God promised to show him. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Abraham was enabled to do what he did by virtue of the faith that he had. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8-9). In like manner, we must show that we truly believe God by obeying the commands that He gives us in His Word.

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But there is something else we learn from this passage, and that is that faith is strengthened by obedience. As we obey God by acting on our faith, God strengthens us to venture out farther and farther on the path of obedience; one act of faith leads to another, and that to another, so that we go forward with God, and as we go forward, we discover more and more of the mercies that He has prepared for us beforehand. That was what Abraham experienced as he journeyed in faith to the land of Canaan and then traversed the land from north to south. Abraham's journey of faith unfolds in three stages: first, as a response to God's call, Abraham obeyed the command of God by leaving Haran; then, as he arrived at the promised land, Abraham surveyed the mercies of God by traversing the whole length of Canaan from north to south; then, as his faith was strengthened by what he saw and experienced, he prayed to the name of God and built altars to God at different locations, thereby claiming the whole land for God. With each step he took, his faith was strengthened, and that was shown forth by his continual advancing movement forward and his continual response of worship to the Lord.

Let us consider these three stages in Abraham's journey of faith:

I. Abraham Obeyed the Command of God (vs. 4-5) -- The first thing Abraham did after receiving the call from God was to obey God's command without delay. He gathered everything he had and began the long and arduous journey from Haran to Mesopotamia, a journey of some 800 miles. One gets the impression from the narrative that Abraham responded promptly to God's command without delay. There was no arguing on his part, nor any questioning or doubting as to what he should; there was only swift and unhesitating obedience to the will of God. Abraham put his hand to the plow and never looked back; he made a firm commitment to obey God, and never vacillated in that commitment. What a wonderful example that is to all of us; for there is no way we can serve God effectively unless our lives are characterized by a singleness of purpose. As Warren Wiersbe says, "Faith and a double mind never go together, and you cannot serve two masters. Faith demands commitment."

Apparently, Abraham's resolve to obey God impacted others around him, for we read that not only his wife Sarai, but his nephew Lot, were willing to accompany him on this journey. Lot was the son of Abraham's brother Haran, who had died in Ur of the Chaldees. It seems likely that Abraham had taken responsibility for raising his nephew after the death of his brother, and that a close bond had developed between them. Also, it seems pretty obvious that Lot had great respect for his uncle and believed that God was with him; otherwise, why would

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he choose to accompany him on this journey into the unknown? Lot could easily have chosen to settle down with the rest of Terah's family in Haran. But he chose instead to go with Abraham; and that is a testimony to the impact that Abraham's faith had on those around him.

In addition to his wife and his nephew, Abraham also took with him all his possessions, which included his flocks and his material wealth, as well as "the people he had acquired in Haran." These people may refer to Abraham's household servants, but it is interesting to note that the phrase used here can be more also be translated "the souls he had gained" and this had led some commentators to believe that this is referring to proselytes, people who had been won to faith in the God of Abraham through Abraham's testimony. They chose to go with him on this journey to an unknown land. That is a definite possibility.

What is so impressive about Abraham's departure from Haran is the total commitment he displayed in responding to God's call. He did not hedge his bets by leaving behind a house or lands or some other investments to fall back on in case things didn't work out in Canaan. He left Haran with everything he had. He left as a man leaves who is never planning to return-- similar to the way in which our pilgrim forefathers left the shores of England to come to the new world. They risked all they had-- their lives, their families, their possessions-- in order to pursue a goal they believed line up with the will of God. As Kirk Cameron said in the movie *Monumental*, the pilgrims who boarded the *Mayflower* were people who were "all in"-- totally committed to the goal they were pursuing. That was a necessary in order to attain their goal. No soldier can fight triumph in battle who is only half committed to the fight. He must give all he has to the struggle or he had better not fight at all. Only those who persevere through trial will celebrate the joy of triumph.

Abraham's persevering attitude was rewarded at length by his arrival in Canaan, as we read at the end of verse 5-- ". . . and they departed to the land of Canaan. So they came to the land of Canaan." We are not given the details of Abraham's journey, but whatever trials he met with along the way, he did not allow them to discourage him or derail him from his goal, for he as Kent Hughes says, Abraham's "clear vision of God's call and the future detached him from the world, just as it will always detach God's people from grounding their lives too deeply in the present."

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I believe the example of Abraham should inspire each one of us to consider the goals God would have us pursue for the advancement of His kingdom in this world. It should make us bold and daring and enterprising for the cause of God in this world. Now, obviously, we cannot take Abraham's experience as normative in every way. He was, after all, a prophet of God; his call was extraordinary, in that it involved special divine revelation. We have no right to expect from God a similar call. We have no right to wait for a dream or vision or audible voice from heaven before we get moving to carry out the Great Commission. Rather, what God wants us to consider our gifts and the opportunities available to us, and He wants us to resolve to exploit both of these in reaching others with the gospel of Christ. We should be willing to venture in faith into new territory as we seek to give our all to advance the cause of Christ on earth.

There are so many opportunities available for ministering the truth of God and the love of God to needy sinners right here in Texarkana. In our own church, we have people who regularly go to the nursing home to visit the elderly and the infirm. We have people who regularly visit or write to prisoners who are unable to join a local church. We have people who reach out in love to friends, neighbors, and relatives by visiting them in the hospital or dropping by their homes when they have experienced some devastating loss or are facing some major crisis. There are so many opportunities that God gives to each of us to serve Him in some way. How are we exploiting those opportunities?

II. Abraham Surveyed the Mercies of God (vs. 6-9)-- The next stage in the development of Abraham's faith grew out of the first. As Abraham surrendered himself to do the will of God, God responded by sustaining Abraham in the path of obedience and strengthening his faith. This is always the way God works; as we act in faith by surrendering ourselves to the will of God, God responds by pouring out on us a greater measure of faith, so that we become increasingly bold in our convictions and fearless in our actions. Jesus highlighted this principle of God's working when he said, "For whoever has, to him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken away" (Luke 8:18). Abraham had faith, and as his faith came into exercise through obedience, his faith increased, so that he was able to persevere in his journey and at length was rewarded with the joyful privilege of surveying the mercies of God with his own eyes. We see that upon his arrival in Canaan. Once he arrived in Canaan, he was led by God on a journey of discovery that enabled

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him to survey the whole of this land which God had appointed as the visible token of His divine favor and sovereign love.

His journey across Canaan as he entered from the north took him first of all to the ancient city of Shechem, which was located in the geographical center of Canaan. From there, he traveled in a southeasterly direction to the hill country east of Bethel. Then he continued journeying south along the mountain range that divides Canaan into two parts, until he reached the Negev, a dry, arid region in the south of Canaan. His journey took him across the whole country, so that he was able to familiarize himself with the size, the landscape, the natural resources, and the inhabitants of this land to which God had brought him. Along the way, God had been strengthening his faith; so by the time Abraham arrived in Canaan, it was with a sense of great boldness and confidence in the Lord. Abraham had seen God's faithfulness proven again and again in the past, so he was confident that God would continue to watch over him in the future. God's dealings with Abraham, says Geoff Thomas, "had developed in him a growing certainty of just how powerful and caring was his new Master. . . God was showing Abraham what he does to those who trust him and obey him. He is our Sovereign Protector; walls of salvation surround the souls of those he delights to defend."

So confident was Abraham, in fact, that he was not afraid to move right into the center of the country, to a place where he was surrounded on every side by the inhabitants of the land. They were numerous, well-armed, and gathered into various towns and cities, but Abraham does not appear to have been afraid of them; I say that because he journeyed through the land, not in secret, but in plain view, traveling in a caravan with numerous flocks, herds, and household servants. Such a sizable company could hardly remain hidden. His boldness stemmed directly from his trust in God, a trust that enabled him to walk through the land as if he owned it.

For the fact is, Abraham did own land-- even though he did not realize that at first. He owned it, because the Lord had purposed to give this very land to him and to his descendants as an everlasting possession. Abraham did not learn about his inheritance, however, until after he reached the promised land. When he left Haran, God had simply said to him, "Go to a land that I will show you." But now, when he arrived in Canaan, God appeared to him and told him that the land was actually his. We read in verse 7, "The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your descendants I will give this land.'" This is the first time that we read of God "appearing" to Abraham. God had spoken to Abraham earlier, but now he

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appeared to him, perhaps in a vision or dream. Abraham had left all to follow an unseen God to an unknown destination, and now he was granted a vision of the Lord. "Pilgrims who leave all and follow God see more and more" writes Kent Hughes. Moreover, Abraham was privileged to survey God's mercy to him, by surveying the land of his inheritance. What would Abraham have learned about the land by surveying it?

A. A Big Land-- The first thing that would have impressed Abraham was the size of the land; it was a big land. Now, the term "big" is obviously relative in meaning. The land of Canaan was not big compared to many modern nations; but it was a sizeable piece of real estate for one man to receive as an inheritance for himself and his descendants. Modern Israel is about the size of the state of New Jersey; it occupies an area of over 8000 square miles; ancient Canaan occupied a considerably area larger than that. So we are talking about a land bigger than any farm or ranch or homestead. It was a country that God had purposed to give to Abraham, a big, wide open country with rivers and lakes and pastures and deserts and mountain ranges stretching out in all directions. When God said to Abraham, "To your descendants I give this land," Abraham must have felt astounded. How many millions of descendants would it take to fill this land? Keep in mind that, so far, Abraham had not had one child. He was old, Sarah was old, and God was telling him that his descendants would inherit this vast country all around him as their homeland. It must have stretched Abraham's faith tremendously to picture his descendants occupying the whole length and breadth of this land.

B. A Beautiful Land-- Not only was it a big land, but a beautiful land, as well. We know that from descriptions of Canaan given elsewhere in Scripture. It is described more than once as a "land flowing with milk and honey." In Genesis 13, we are given a description of the valley of the Jordan river, and the sight of it must have been delightful. It was "well watered everywhere," we read, "like the garden of the Lord." In the well-watered river valleys, Canaan was a land of green pastures and quiet waters, an idyllic place for flocks to graze. In Numbers 13, when the Hebrew spies return from going throughout the land, they bring with them clusters of grapes and pomegranates and figs, and say to the people concerning the land, "It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit." So Abraham must have been impressed by the beauty of the land his eyes surveyed.

At the same time, however, there were several things about the land he must have found disturbing.

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C. A Benighted Land-- First of all, Abraham must have realized very shortly after entering Canaan that this was a benighted land-- that is, a land as spiritually dark as the land from which he came. It was a land given over to the practice of idolatry, and that would have evident from the presence of pagan worship sites all over the country. One such worship site is mentioned in verse 6-- the terebinth tree of Moreh, which was located near the city of Shechem. This was probably an oak tree, and we know from archaeological finds that pagan peoples often worshipped fertility deities under such trees. The word "Moreh" means "teacher, oracle, giver," so this tree was probably the place where the Canaanites would assemble to hear oracles that their soothsayers would claim to receive from the rustling of the leaves. It must have grieved Abraham to realize that the people of this land were as spiritually blind as the members of his own family whom he left behind in Haran, who continued to worship the moon god Nannar. The spiritual blindness of the Canaanites not only led them to pay heed to false prophets, but to engage in cruel and barbaric practices, such as the offering of their own infants as burnt offerings to the gods Baal and Molech.

D. A Built Up Land-- Another disturbing feature of the land for Abraham would have been its "built up" character. This was no virgin country just waiting for Abraham and his descendants to come and settle. Canaan was not like the American West in the pioneer days-- a wide open land just waiting for brave soul to come and stake out a claim in wilderness areas where no human foot had ever trod, and the soil had never been worked by a plow. No, this was a built up land, an occupied land full of ancient people living in ancient cities that were well fortified and full of streets and buildings and temples and towers testifying to a well-developed civilization and culture. As Abraham looked upon these cities and roads and bridges and towers, the sobering thought must have dawned on him, that before his descendants could live here as their home, they would first have to dispossess the Canaanites. That would not be an easy job, for there was another feature about this land that must have disturbed Abraham-- it was a battle ready land.

E. A Battle Ready Land-- By that I mean, the inhabitants of the land were prepared to defend themselves against attackers. Later on in the Bible, in the Book of Judges, we read about some of the weapons the Canaanite tribes used when they went into battle. These included iron chariots, which were used with great effectiveness in the lowlands of Canaan. We read in Judges 1:19 how the Israelites "could not drive out the inhabitants of the lowland, because they had chariots of iron." Another formidable weapon the Canaanites possessed were

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swords, which the Israelites had to contend with in battles with the Midianites and other tribes. We also know that the Canaanites cities were fortified with high walls, such as the walls that surrounded the city of Jericho. So these tribes were "battle ready" and they posed a formidable threat to anyone who would attempt to dispossess them. All this must have dawned on Abraham as he walked the length and breadth of the land which God had promised to give to his descendants. He must have thought to himself, "What a wonderful land this is! But how will my descendants ever possess it without fight?" For his own part, Abraham knew that it was not his calling to dispossess the people of the land. That would be the calling of his descendants on a future day; but his own calling was to live as a pilgrim and sojourner in this land of promise, waiting for that future day when God would deliver the land into the hands of his offspring.

The challenge to Abraham's faith was to believe in what was not yet a visible reality. Could he live in this land, fully convinced of God's promise? Could he regard it as the land of his inheritance, even though he himself might never possess the land personally?

The answer to these questions is seen in what Abraham did. Abraham had obeyed the command of God by leaving Haran and persevering until he reached his destination; he had surveyed the mercies of God by traversing Canaan from north to south. So now, as he reflected soberly on the formidable difficulties his descendants would face in taking possession of the land, Abraham affirmed his faith in the promise of God by praying to the name of God and building altars to the Lord in different locations.

III. Abraham Prayed to the Name of God (v. 7, 8b) -- The first altar he built was at Shechem, when the Lord appeared to him and said to him, "To your descendants I will give this land." Abraham was so moved by God's condescending grace at Shechem, that he felt compelled to mark the spot where God had manifested His presence and uttered such an awe-inspiring promise. Abraham did not understand how God would give the land of Canaan to his descendants; but he did not stumble at God's promise in unbelief by denying that He could do what he said. This was how Abraham characteristically responded to all the promises God made to him, no matter how impossible they seemed from a merely human perspective. As Paul says in Romans 4, Abraham "did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised, He was able also to perform" (Romans 4:21). By building an altar at Shechem, near the spot where the Canaanites venerated a pagan god, Abraham was confessing his faith in the

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Lord's promise, and in a sense, he was claiming the land for God. This altar sent a message to the pagans of that land, says John Jeske. Abraham was telling the pagans, and even the men and women of his own household, "I don't know whom you are going to worship, but I want you to know that the only God deserving of your worship is the God who has appeared to me with all his grace and favor." The very public nature of this altar showed that Abraham was not afraid to own the Lord before men. Though men might be offended by his worship, Abraham was not about to hide his faith or live incognito in this dark, pagan society. He was going to nail his colors to the mast and invite all his neighbors to abandon their idols and join him in the worship of the only true and living God. Before a watching world, we must be willing to do the same.

Later, when he traveled east of Bethel, he built another altar and called on the name of the Lord. Everywhere he went, Abraham declared his faith in the Lord. He worshipped the Lord openly, not in secret. Not only that, he acted like someone who had every right to be in that dark land and every right to shine forth the light of God's truth in the midst of pagan darkness. He was not sheepish or timid or cowering in his movements through the land; on the contrary, he moved about in the land as if he owned it. As Philip Eveson puts it, "All his movements were symbolic of taking possession of the land . . . His action was an acted prophecy of a time when Israel would later take possession of the whole land from the Canaanites."

Abraham acted in this way because he believed the promise of God. He believed that God had appointed both him and his descendants to be the heirs of this land, so he acted like an heir, because he saw with the eye of faith the future that God had promised, and he regarded that future as if it were already a reality. He knew that God "calls those things which do not exist as though they did," and that is why he was able to live fearlessly in that pagan land, worshipping God openly, confessing his truth, building altars to Him, and claiming that land for God.

In other words, Abraham saw Canaan as a blessed land. Canaan was not only a big and beautiful land with a spiritually benighted populace. It was not only a built up land with many cities whose inhabitants were ready for battle-- it was above all things, a blessed land., a land dedicated and set apart to the Lord, where the people of God were destined to receive God's blessings in abundance.

CONCLUSION

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So what does Abraham's experience tell us about our own? Well, like Abraham, we too have been given the promise of an inheritance. In fact, we have been promised the very same inheritance as Abraham, for in Christ, we have been made sons of Abraham and heirs with Abraham of the same promise. That means we are destined to inherit the "land of promise" along with our father Abraham. Only now, with the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ into the world, the borders of the promised land have been expanded far beyond the limits that God set for Canaan in the Old Testament. The borders have now expanded to encompass the whole earth as our inheritance; and Jesus made this clear in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." The apostle Paul made this clear when he said in the book of Romans that Abraham was promised the whole world as an inheritance. God's people are destined to inherit the earth-- and that promise ultimately looks beyond this present age to the age to come, when we will inherit a new earth. As Peter said, "According to His promise, we look for a new heaven and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells."

The question we need to ask this morning, however, is this: are we living like people who are destined to inherit the earth? Like Abraham, are we willing to own our Lord openly as we walk the length and breadth of this land which the Lord has promised to us as an inheritance? Are we willing to bring glory to Him before a watching world by the pure and holy worship we offer to Him in contrast to all the false religion that contaminate this planet? Are we willing to bear witness to the reality of God's presence at all times by the way we speak and the way we live? Or do we live timid, cowering, fearful lives, as if we really did not have a right to be here at all? Of course, there are those in our spiritually darkened land who would have us believe that we do not have a right to be here at all. At the very least, they would have us believe that we have no right to speak and live openly for Christ in the public square. It is incumbent on us, they say, to shut our mouths, hide our beliefs, and live and speak in a way that is innocuous and uncontroversial and politically correct. But they forget that God has made us heirs of the world; and if anyone has a right to speak and live according to his convictions, it is the people of God. Why? Because the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. We have every right to live as heirs of the world, to worship God openly, to speak for God openly, to live fearlessly for God in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

What we need is a spirit of boldness, and that will come as we respond in faith to the Word of God. That Word calls us to move out of our comfort zone into the

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particular spheres of ministry and service for which God has equipped each one of us with the necessary gifts and the open doors of opportunity. But we must be willing to use those gifts and go through those doors. Like Abraham, we must be willing to venture into unknown territory, surrendering all that we are and have to God as we pursue the interests of his kingdom. From a human standpoint, that may seem at times like a risky thing to do. But the Scripture invites us to put our trust in God, and to believe that as we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, all our needs will be provided. It is certainly counter-intuitive to take risks of any kind in the times in which we are living-- times of economic and political uncertainty. "Everything around us tells us to hunker down, save everything, hedge ourselves about with every protection," says Kent Hughes. "Our natural desires are for more comforts . . . but God's Word says otherwise." God's Word calls us to go forth boldly to do God's will and take the future by the horns. We have an Almighty God to sustain us as we go forward on the path of obedience. What have we to fear? Let us obey His word, that we might be strengthened, to the end that we might at length survey the mercies of God and praise the name of God with all that in us lies. Amen.