

The Life of Faith, Part 1: Sovereign Effectual Calling (Genesis 12)

Please turn in God's Word to Hebrews 11 and this evening I want to introduce and begin a new series called Living the Life of Faith. Hebrews 11 is a great place to start because it's the great "faith chapter" of Scripture. The word "faith" appears 26x in 23 verses, more in this one chapter than in entire books of the New Testament

¹ *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* ² *For by it the men of old gained approval.*

And the rest of the chapter illustrates faith by the men of old. Why study faith? v. 6: "*without faith it is impossible to please God...*"

The flip-side is that with faith it *is* possible to please God. Verses 3-7 give examples of those whose faith God was pleased with. He starts in Genesis 1-11; Abel in v. 4 and Gen. 4, Enoch in v. 5 and Gen. 5, Noah in v. 7 and Gen. 7, chapter-by-chapter highlights, not an exhaustive list but a representative list covering 2K-2.5K years

The rest of Hebrews 11, v. 20 to the end covers another 1,000+ years of OT history, but what's interesting is in-between the 3,500 years, verses 8-19 slow it down and stay on one man for 11 verses, just 100 yrs, Abraham. Far more than anyone else, the 100 years of Abraham's life are given the most space and attention in describing what faith looks like. That gives a good exegetical clue as to where we should spend our time in the Word of God if we want to study what the life of faith looks like. We need to study about Abraham.

To put Genesis as a whole in perspective, chapters 1-25 cover over 2,000 years but more than half of those chapters cover just 100 years in Abraham's life. 5% of the time gets 50% of the attention. Where Scripture slows down we must slow down to watch closely

Abraham gets more mention by name in the NT than even David. Abraham's name appears more in the NT than most people who lived in NT times, and Abraham died 2,000 years before the NT! Only a few *New Testament* characters are listed more in the NT than Abraham. Abraham is mentioned in the NT by Jews and John the Baptist and Jesus and James and Stephen and Peter and Paul and in place after place, Abraham is the pre-eminent paragon and pattern of faith and he has the most prominent place in Hebrews 11

⁸ *By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. [life of Abraham down to v. 19]*

12:1 *Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us [greatest in chapter 11 being Abraham], let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith ...*

So that's the mission of this new series we're starting tonight. As we look at Abraham's life, we need to look to Jesus who was the author and perfecter of Abraham's faith. We want to glorify his Savior not glorify a mere sinner saved by grace thru faith. There were sins that easily entangled even Abraham, as we'll see, and even the man called "father of faith" stumbled in the race of faith, as we'll also see tonight. But as we consider those who have gone before us, even where they fell and got up should encourage us to run the race of faith and not to stop when we stumble or trip or are entangled by sin. Let's fix our eyes on the Lord who enabled them to endure and His faithfulness will enable us to endure in faith, too.

Jesus is "the finisher of our faith." Jesus gets us to the finish line. And notice in v. 2 who is the "author of faith" described in Heb 11. Jesus is the author of faith, in context, including Abraham's faith, and ours. The phrase "author of faith" can be translated "initiator of faith" or "originator of faith" – we didn't initiate or originate our faith, Jesus did. The word can mean "beginner, cause," same root word used of Jesus in Revelation as "the beginning and the end."

Philippians 1:6 "He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it," and v. 29 adds that our faith is granted us by Him. Faith is not of/from ourselves, Eph. 2:8-9 says, lit. "not out of us," faith is part of the gift of God in salvation, so no man can boast. It is the sovereign effectual call of God, and what theologians mean by that is that *this call effects and enables what it calls for*, not a general invitation but a specific sovereign summons that brings us. Sovereign grace is good news for sinful saints like Abraham and us

So let's turn to Genesis 12 and continue our study through Genesis and consider The Life of Faith, Part 1: Sovereign Effectual Calling

We'll be studying broader sections and bigger picture lessons on faith, sometimes a chapter at a time, with some breaks in-between.

In preaching OT stories, key NT principles to keep in mind are:

1. All Scripture is for teaching, reproof, correction, training
2. OT stories are often examples of what we're not to do and be
 1 Cor 10:11–13 (NIV) *These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us ...*
¹² *So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!* ¹³ *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful ...*
3. OT stories should give us encouragement and hope (Rom 15:4)
For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.
4. Stories in the OT should point us to Jesus (Luke 24:27)
 Beginning with the first book of Moses, starting in Genesis, *Jesus explained to them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures.* It all points to Jesus, faith's author/perfector.

Genesis 12:1 *Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; [the promised land, Canaan, v. 5-7]*

The Lord also calls us to be willing to leave everything to follow.

What country was Abram called to leave? 11:31 "Ur of Chaldeans"

- Kent Hughes explains it's 'what is today southern Iraq.
- The city was dominated by a massive three-staged Ziggurat built by Ur-Nammu ... with the top level bearing the silver one-roomed shrine of Nammu, the moon-god.
- The royal cemetery reveals that ritual burials were sealed with the horrors of human sacrifice. So Ur, advanced as it was, was nevertheless in the bonds of darkest paganism.
- And [Abram, later re-named] Abraham, as an idolater (Joshua 24:2), was a part of its ... religious structure.¹

God didn't choose Abraham because he was such a good guy. He was an idol-worshipping Iraqi when God's sovereign effectual call came. This is not a good man but a bad man saved by a good God.

Arthur W. Pink writes: 'That it was grace and grace alone, sovereign grace, which called Abram is seen in his natural state when God first appeared to him. There was nothing whatever in the object of His choice which commended him to God. There was nothing whatever in Abram which merited God's esteem. The cause of election must always be traced to God's will.

Election itself is "of grace"(Rom. 11:5), therefore it depends in no wise upon any worthiness in the object—either actual or foreseen. If it did, it would not be "of grace." That it was not a question of worthiness in Abram is clear from the language of Isaiah 51:1-2'²

Isaiah 51:1–2 (NKJV) “... *Look to the rock from which you were hewn, And to the hole of the pit from which you were dug.* ² *Look to Abraham your father...For I called him alone, And blessed him*”

Considering sovereign effectual calling should humble us (1 Cor 1)

Gen 12:2: *I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing;* ³ *And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families [nations] of the earth will be blessed.*”

This is the goal of the rest of the OT and history, leading to Christ. God called one man (v. 1) and one nation (v. 2) to bring blessing to all men and all nations (v. 3), grace to Jews to bring *grace to you*. Many in history have understood from both OT and NT history that the sovereign calling of God on Abram *and his nation* are not revocable but are still applicable to the future of Israel and nations.

William Perkins wrote in 1579 on this promise to Abraham and his nation: “I gather that the nation of the Jews shall be called, and converted to the participation of this blessing: when, and how, God knows: but that it shall be done before the end of the world we know.” [Iain Murray adds] The same truth was opened by the succession of Puritan leaders ... belief in a future conversion of the Jews became commonplace among the English Puritans.’³

In more recent years some theologians have emphasized only the nation Israel in God’s future plan, other theologians have taught there is no future for the nation Israel in God’s plan though they might admit God’s future for other nations but not Israel because of their sin, but as I understand Scripture and sovereign election and as I see even the life of Abraham and his sin and Israel and her sin, I see biblical promises still for this nation and for other nations

Gal. 3:8 *The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU.”* [Gen 12:3] ⁹ *So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.*

I don't have a Jewish bone in my body or Jewish blood in my veins but I get in on the gospel blessing of this text with Abraham! This passage points ultimately beyond just Abraham and Israel and the Jews to a Jewish Messiah and a gospel for Jews and Gentiles. It's still plan A after most of the Jews rejected their Messiah.

Peter says to unsaved Jews in Acts 3:25 (NIV) "*you are heirs of the ... covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.'*"²⁶ *When God raised up his servant [Jesus], he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways."*

The fact that the New Covenant has come doesn't cancel out God's covenant with Abraham. Our part in this doesn't cancel out theirs. The gospel was not just to the Jew first but also was to be through the Jews to the Gentiles. Abraham and His offspring were blessed *to be a blessing* and to bring gospel blessings to all nations of earth – this is the original Great Commission that Jesus re-commissions His Jewish disciples to fulfill in Mt 28:19 for "all nations/peoples." Rom 11 has God's plan still to save Israel and fullness of Gentiles.

We've studied God's multi-ethnic family plan from this text and in v. 4-9 last year, God's heart for Africans, Arabs, specific nations in Genesis 10, and God's future not just for one nation but all nations. But tonight, I want to pick up where we left off and continue in v. 10 where Abraham moves away from this plan and this Promised Land when times get tough, and I want us all to see that sovereign grace is good news for Abraham, for Israel, and for us who believe

¹⁰ *Now there was a famine in the land [so faith is tested. The land that God called him to isn't producing. Sarah isn't producing kids and if they die in famine, what can God do?]; so Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.*

Up until now, Abram has been following God's commands, v. 4, he goes to the land of Canaan in v. 5. In the end of v. 7 he built an altar to the Lord. In the end of v. 8 he built an altar to the Lord also as he traveled to a mountain near Bethel, worshipping, calling on the name of the Lord. But here when the famine strikes, we don't read he called on the Lord or consulted the Lord or sought His will. The whole time he is in Egypt the rest of the chapter doesn't say he worshipped or prayed to God, until he comes back to Bethel in chapter 13, and returns to the place of worship and promised land.

In Ruth 1:1 we read a similar story of a man in a famine taking his family faraway from the promised land, also with consequences

Later this pattern of Jews in trouble going to Egypt for help is rebuked. Isaiah 30:2 pronounces a woe on God's people who ***“proceed down to Egypt Without consulting Me, To take refuge in the safety of Pharaoh And to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt!***³ ***“Therefore the safety of Pharaoh will be your shame And the shelter in the shadow of Egypt, your humiliation ...***

Those prophetic words certainly apply to how this story unfolds. Abraham is not trusting the Lord with all his heart, he's leaning on his own understanding. And it appears he's making it up as he goes¹¹ *It came about when he came near to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, “See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman... [just a little side-note if you're a woman, sentences that start that way may have an ulterior motive not far behind. Here Abram's comes]*¹² *and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife’; and they will kill me, but they will let you live.*¹³ ***“Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me ...***

He's convinced himself and convinces her to lie, and could justify it in his mind, “technically you are my sister, my half-sister.” But a half-truth that deceives or hides is a lie. God doesn't need our help, but Abram will soon need God's help when his doesn't go so well.

¹⁴ *It came about when Abram came into Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful.*¹⁵ *Pharaoh's officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house.* [Verse 19 explains they tried the “she's my sister” plan but she was taken to be one of Pharaoh's wives anyway. So what's Abraham going to do now? He's a foreigner who can't just show up in the palace singing “Pharaoh, Pharaoh, oh baby, let my Sarah go” (with or without the hand motions).]¹⁶ *Therefore he treated Abram well for her sake; and gave him sheep and oxen and donkeys and male and female servants and female donkeys and camels.* [But Abram doesn't have the female who matters most to him, his wife. The female Egyptian servant Hagar they acquire here later becomes a snare to Abram and Sarai and the livestock he acquires here becomes a problem in Gen 13]

By the way, critics once said v. 16 can't be true because there's no evidence that camels were domesticated in the time of Abraham.

Guess what? Archaeology later discovered actually they were.⁴ Archaeology from Egypt also records people migrating in famine. There's actually something else here that shows the truthfulness of Scripture: it presents its heroes and greatest saints as great sinners. This is one of the evidences that the Bible is inspired, unlike other books in ancient and modern times written about heroes glorifying them and magnifying their strengths while minimizing weaknesses. From the get-go, Israel's great father of the faith needs God's grace

Notice the unconditional election of Abraham and unconditional promises of God in v. 3 remain faithful even when Abraham is not. God promised to Abraham and his family, literally "those who *treat you lightly/wrongly* I will curse ..." and it's fulfilled in v. 17:

¹⁷ *But the LORD struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.* [plagues are part of curses in OT]

Later when Abraham's Jewish descendants were mistreated by Egypt in the time of Moses, God curses them with plagues again, until Pharaoh releases the people who don't belong to him again.

¹⁸ *Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?"*

¹⁹ *"Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go."* ²⁰ *Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they escorted him away, with his wife and all that belonged to him.* [makes you wonder what Abram and Sarah's conversations were on the long trip back]

But I want to move from their journey to lessons for our journey of faith, going back to what the NT says are some purposes of the OT

**please turn to the book Romans

1. All Scripture is for teaching, reproof, correcting, training

Teaching – It's always better to speak truth and trust God's truth
Rebuke - the father of the faith is being rebuked by a pagan king. Pharaoh is presented in a better light than the great 'father of faith'
Correction – rebuke God sends our way is a gracious thing, and it's intended not to crush us but to correct us back to the right way
Training – God tests our faith so it will grow as we trust him. He trains us not to turn to Egypt or to the world when times get tough

Rom. 1-2 makes clear that since the beginning, all men are sinners and are without excuse, before Abraham, before the Law of Moses, before the gospel of Jesus was written, all men are without excuse.

3:3 *What then? If some [Jews, v. 1] did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? ⁴ May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar ... ² What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; ¹⁰ as it is written, “THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE ... [not even Abraham, look at the end of v. 13] ... WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING ... ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace ...*

And the illustration of justification he gives in Rom. 4 is Abraham. Rom 4:16 links this grace with faith in the life of Father Abraham: ¹⁶ *For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷ (as it is written, “A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU”) in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and **calls into being** that which does not exist*

That’s the sovereign effectual call of God, it creates what it calls for, just as the call of God in creation out of nothing or the call of the Lord to Lazarus, a call that actually creates life in the dead. God called Abram and Israel and Romans 11:15 says when Israel one day accepts Jesus, Paul says it will be “life from the dead” (and I think he may be referring to the promise of Ezekiel 37). He says to Israel there “it’s not for your sake, but for My name.” In our calling from spiritual deadness, too, it’s death-to-life (Eph 2).

2. OT stories are often examples of what we’re not to do and be

1 Cor 10:11-12 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us ... So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!

A.W. Pink says faith ‘must be tested and at times the meal in the barrel will run very low. The failure of Abram is a solemn warning against being occupied with circumstances instead of with God. Look not at the famine but unto God’s faithfulness ... Beware of going down to Egypt. The friendship of the world is enmity with God ... As you see in the failures of Abram the sad record of your own history, marvel anew at the long sufferance of God which deals in such infinite patience and grace with His erring and ungrateful children.’⁵ [see, this is a picture of us, too, and the Lord]

3. OT stories should give us encouragement and hope

Right after the warning in Corinthians to take heed lest we fall, it has this word of encourage and hope: "... *but God is faithful.*"

Look at Romans 15:4 *For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

Rom. 8:35: *Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine ... [we could add in Abram's story, failure, falsehood, foolishness] ³⁸I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

That should encourage us, Amen? As Paul says in another place, if we are faithless, He remains faithful for He cannot deny Himself. He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it. Jesus is the author of faith, and its perfecter. Fix your eyes on Him!

Unconditional election isn't about us and doesn't depend on us, see v. 30: *He predestined, He called, He justified, He glorified. If God is for us who or what can be against us?* Even our failing or falling short is included in the "all things" God is causing to work together for good, end of v. 28 says for *the called according to His purpose.*

Romans 9 then brings up Israel as illustration of this, v. 7, Abram who God called, and God called his son Isaac rather than Ishmael. ¹⁰ *And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; ¹¹ for though the twins were not yet born [they were womb-mates] and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, ¹² it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER." ¹³ Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED." [He chooses one, not the other] ¹⁴ What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! ¹⁵ For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION." ¹⁶ So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy [God chose Moses, not Pharaoh]*

Vs. 17-18 talk about Pharaoh. Think of that Exodus vs. Gen. 12:

- It was also a famine in the land that brought Jacob/Israel and his sons to Egypt later in Genesis, a repeated pattern
- The word “sojourn” is used of both times (12:1 and 47:4)
- The same Hebrew words “take ... go ... send” are used in relation to both Pharaohs (12:19-20, Exodus 12:32, etc.)
- Both times things that were evil God used for good (50:20)
- Both times Jews end up in Pharaoh’s family (Sarai, Moses) and both God brings back to be with their real family
- Both times God sent plagues to get His people out of Egypt
- Both times His people leave with wealth (12:16, Ex 12:36)
- Both times Egyptians leave with them (12:16, Ex 12:39)
- Both times they return to the land God promised Abraham

But Gen 12 prefigures more than Joseph and the deliverer Moses...

4. Stories in the OT should point us to Jesus

The first chapter and verse of the NT begins by calling Jesus the “*son of Abraham*” and then it traces his family through Isaac and Jacob and his brothers who went down to Egypt with Joseph in another famine. It is another man named Joseph, husband to Mary, mother of Jesus, and this family also leaves the promised land in a time of crisis and they go down to Egypt, but at God’s command.

Matt. 2 says Joseph/Mary/Jesus went to fulfill OT language: “*Out of Egypt I called My Son.*” This time He called a *sinless* son out of Egypt. This time Jesus went to Egypt and came back to the land of promise as one who would succeed where Abram and Israel failed. Abram’s lies didn’t deliver, Gen 12. Jesus is the truth that delivers. The deliverance from Egypt in the OT was a picture of one greater!

The very language of Gen 12:1-3 points to one greater than Abram

- 12:1: “*Go ... from your father’s house ... to the land ...*”

Jesus left His Father’s house in heaven in obedience to the call to come to our land of lies and sin. Jesus didn’t compromise when tempted for lack of food (Mt. 4). He never stumbled or wavered or looked to human solutions, He always looked to the Father’s will. He even told a story about a prodigal son who left his land, but in that story it is a famine that brings him back; he repents (Luke 15). Isaiah 53 says of Messiah, He did nothing wrong, “*nor was there any deceit in His mouth*” (v. 9b). Though we all go astray, it says the iniquity of us all was placed upon Christ for all His sheep, v. 6.

- Gen. 12:2 “***I will...make your name great...***” (Phil. 2:9)
- ***And so you shall be a blessing*** [Jesus/salvation is greatest of all] *And I will bless those who bless you* [Ps 2:12, etc.]
- Gen 12:3 *And the one who treats you lightly I will curse ...*

We once treated Jesus light, Jesus the seed of Abraham, and so the promise of curse in Genesis 12:3 should rightly fall on us. But Gal. 3:13 says Jesus became the curse for us by dying on a cross so that we can become a part of the blessed seed of Abraham *in Christ*:

- *in you all the families/nations of the earth will be blessed.*

Galatians 3 explains this comes through Jesus as seed of Abraham, the blessing of salvation through the gospel revealed in Genesis 12. That same chapter says in an ultimate sense, Gen. 12 is about Jesus and Heb 12 says *fix our eyes on Jesus, faith's author and perfecter*

In Luke 24 it says when Jesus started in Genesis and explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures, they said later “*How our hearts burned within us as He opened the Scripture to us!*” May the Lord do the same in our hearts in this study. Amen

¹Kent Hughes, *Hebrews*, (Preaching the Word series, Crossway, 1993), p. 2095.

² Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis* (Moody, 1992 ed.), p. 140.

³ Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, p. 42-43.

⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*, p. 384.

⁵ Pink, 146.