

# The Beginning of a New Life

*The Life of Abraham*

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Let's turn to the book of Genesis for our Old Testament reading, Genesis 11, reading from verse 27 down to chapter 12, verse 3. Genesis 11:27, continuing our studies in the life of Abraham.

27 This is the account of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. 28 While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth. 29 Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milkah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milkah and Iskah. 30 Now Sarai was barren, she had no children. 31 Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there. 32 Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Harran.

1 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. 2 I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." [Now just the first phrase of verse 4,] 4 So Abram left, as the LORD had told him

We end our reading at the beginning of this fourth verse in chapter 12. We pray that God will bless his word to us all.

We have had two introductory studies on the life of Abraham, friend of God and the father of the faithful, and we now come to look at his life in more detail. After setting the scene and placing him in his context, tonight and next Sabbath evening, God willing, we want to look at the first few verses of Genesis 12, and our subject this evening and it's an appropriate one on the last Lord's Day, the last day, indeed, of a calendar year, is the

beginning of a new life. The beginning of a new life and as we shall see, Abraham's life began, his new life began with faith.

We stressed this before in our introduction to Abraham. There is nothing more vital to understand about Abraham than that he was, as Paul calls him in Galatians 3:9, the man of faith. Abraham, the man of faith. This was his great characteristic. When the writer of the Hebrews is dealing with faith in chapter 11, from verse 8 to verse 19, he has a lengthy section devoted to Abraham, showing us again and again how Abraham was motivated by faith in everything that he did, and it's something that is tremendously vital for us as the people of God. The scripture tells us that it is by grace that we have been saved through faith, Ephesians 2:8. It is by means of faith that salvation comes. What could be more important? First Paul says again in Romans 1:17, the righteous will live by faith. It is through the channel of faith that we live our lives from day to day. And as we study Abraham's life over the next few months, we will see again and again how faith characterized almost everything that he did and everything that he was, but it's seen particularly clearly here at the beginning of his walk with God, and this evening I'd like to try to isolate for us three elements in true biblical faith, in saving faith, that faith by which we are saved and in which we live.

What does faith mean? When we look at the beginning of Abraham's new life, we have a marvelous diagram, if you like, a summary of what faith really is, and the first thing we see is that faith, biblical faith, true faith, I mean, means hearing God's word. Faith, true faith means hearing God's word. It's very common nowadays for people to admire faith and regard faith highly and to speak of faith itself as a valuable thing. People will sometimes say, "I wish I had your faith." And we have to think clearly about this and to realize in and of itself, faith is of absolutely no value whatsoever, in fact, faith can be disastrous, damaging, and terribly harmful. Faith can be a curse. We read, for example, from time to time of people who have faith in some new cult leader, some messiah, somebody who sets up a new religion or a new group, and they follow him, and they hang on his words, and they drink poison if he tells them to, they commit suicide if he tells them to. They break away from their families, they give him all their money, they subject themselves to his authority, they have faith, tremendous faith, faith which governs their lives but it's faith which is disastrous. They would be far better off if they didn't have that faith. There are millions of people throughout the world, tens of millions, who are faithful adherents of false religions. They believe in those religions with their heart and soul. They would die for them, some of them. They are committed to them. And yet their faith is destructive. The value of faith depends on its basis. What is it built upon? What is it founded on? What does it rest on? And the only faith that has any value is that faith which begins with the word of God and is based on the word of God. All other faith is a false faith.

Note in Genesis 1:1 how Abram's story really begins. It doesn't begin with Abram at all. It doesn't begin with his faith. How does it begin? "The LORD had said to Abram." Abram's new life begins with the word of God. God spoke. God took the initiative. Abram wasn't searching for God as far as we know. God approached Abram and addressed him. God was not a passive figure. He is what C. S. Lewis calls the great

interferer, and thank God that he is the great interferer, and the interferer in Abram's life, he addressed him, he spoke to him personally. God's word came to Abram. The Lord said something to Abram and that's where Abram's new life began, when the Lord said something to him, and the explanation of everything that happened afterwards was this. The Lord said something to Abram. The Lord spoke to Abram. That's the key to all that follows, all the next 10-12 chapters.

The Lord spoke to Abram. He spoke to him. His word came into Abram's heart and life. We don't know how God spoke to Abram. There weren't any written scriptures at this time. We don't know whether he spoke to him in a vision or in a dream or in some other way. It doesn't much matter how he spoke to him, what matters is that he did speak to him. The fact of God speaking is what matters and Abram heard God speaking to him, and Abram somehow, we're not told how, somehow realized that God was speaking to him and he was receiving a message from heaven, from his Creator, and God had something that he wanted Abram to hear and to believe, and everything else in his life followed from the fact that the word of God came to him.

God spoke to Abram. This is where faith begins. True faith means hearing God speaking to us, hearing God's word. Many of us can think back to where our faith began, perhaps some of us had read the Bible for years, we'd heard dozens, hundreds of sermons, but there came a day when we realized for the first time that God was speaking to us, that the Almighty Creator of the heavens and the earth was addressing us personally, that this was a word to our hearts. We were like Samuel and we were brought to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Now, wonder, have we kept that awareness? Are you aware that God is speaking to you now through me?

Our faith begins with hearing the word of God and that's how our faith continues and that's how our faith grows, by hearing the word of God, by the doctrines we believe. We develop our faith by exposing ourselves to the scriptures. That's how we feed our faith. That's how we make it strong. We don't strengthen our faith by trying to work ourselves up into some psychological, exalted, positive state. We don't try to develop positive thinking. We don't try to achieve some mystical awareness of God's presence. We don't follow hunches. We expose ourselves to the word of God and we say, "Speak, Lord."

Faith is based on the word of God. It rests on the word of God and if your faith is weak tonight, I would hazard a guess that a very probable reason is that you may not have been exposing yourselves to God's word as much recently. You may not have been sustaining your faith, feeding it, nourishing it. Your faith is starved. It has nothing to live on and so it's weak.

Faith is based on hearing God's word and that's how we promote faith in other people, by exposing them to the word of God. We want many people in this community to come to faith, to be men and women of faith. How do we go about that task? How do we seek to fulfill our responsibility to bring people by God's help to faith? We don't do it by gimmicks. We don't do it by clever programs. There's only one way, by exposing them to the word of God however we do it, whether it's through the preaching from this pulpit,

whether it's through doo-to-door, whatever way it is, whether it's through giving them literature, we expose them to the word of God. Faith, says Paul in Romans 10:17, comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ. Faith comes through hearing the message. Well, if we don't hear the message, our faith won't grow. So here's a challenge to us all. When you open your Bible each day, are you expecting God to speak to you? Faith means hearing God's word.

Secondly, we see in these verses that faith means obeying God's call. Faith means obeying God's call. God didn't come to Abram with some interesting ideas or a fascinating philosophy, or even with a set of doctrines which he wanted Abram to think about and to believe. He came to Abram with a commandment, with a call which Abram had to obey or disobey. He didn't come to Abram and say, "Here's an interesting concept you might like to think about, Abram." He said, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."

Leave and go, this was the word of God which came to Abram. It was a call requiring obedience. It was an authoritative call. God was not suggesting or proposing, he was commanding. He wasn't having a dialog with Abram or a discussion, it wasn't an encounter group. It was the Lord speaking to his subject and saying, "Abram, do this." It was a very definite call. He didn't say, "Abram, I would like you to put me first in your life. I would like you in some way to show that you trust me." No, he said, "Abram, leave your country and go to a land I will show you."

It was quite a painful call. He had to leave his country and his people and his father's household. That was not easy to do. It meant a revolution in his life. Abram had to turn his life in a completely new direction. He had to put God first. He had a clear choice to make, a commitment which he would undertake or in which he would refuse. This was a very sharp word, a very challenging word, a word that put Abram on the spot, a word that required a response from him. And we're told that Abram left as the Lord told him. Abram left as the Lord told him. He demonstrated his faith by his action, by his obedience. He responded to the word of God. He separated from his old way of life. He left his country and his people and his father's house.

Hebrews 11:8 tells us, "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went." By faith Abram obeyed. True faith means obeying and where there's no obedience, there's no faith. There's no faith. Not enough to hear God's word, we have to obey God's word. This is always an element of true faith. It is not just understanding. It is not just intellectual assent. It wouldn't have been enough for Abram to say, "Lord, I understand perfectly what you're saying to me." He had to obey it. There had to be action. There had to be movement. There had to be change. There had to be commitment.

The well-worn incident, I suppose, that's been quoted almost too often but it is a true story and some of you may not have heard it, and it does illustrate what faith means. The famous story of the accurately titled walker in Victorian times, the french man Blondin, and Blondin was able to walk across Niagara Falls on a tightrope and he did this as a

regular thing and crowds would gather and watch him walking across Niagara Falls on a tightrope, and he also walked across the tightrope wheeling a wheelbarrow. And on one occasion he asked a spectator, "Do you believe that I could safely wheel you across Niagara Falls on this tightrope in a wheelbarrow?" And the man said, "Certainly, I believe." "Right," said Blondin, "get into the wheelbarrow." But the man wouldn't get into the wheelbarrow. Well, that's an illustration of what faith isn't. Faith means getting into the wheelbarrow. "Do you believe that I could save you?" Yes.

Faith means obeying, obeying God's call. Can you remember the last midweek study you were at? What did you obey as a result of that study? Did you go home saying, "This is what God has told me to do and this is what I'm going to do by his grace"? I wonder, can there be too much discussion of the Bible and too little obedience to the Bible? Too much theorizing? Abram could have had a wonderful Bible study on this word of God. He could've said, "Well, it starts off with a second person singular imperative, leave, and then the verb is a number of objects, your country, your people and your father's house. Now there's a coordinate verb, leave and go." And he could have analyzed it and pulled it to pieces, and he and his friends could have sat and discussed it, how wonderful it is. Would that be faith? No. He had to actually obey it. He had to put it into practice and I'm challenged and I'm rebuked as I think of the Bible studies I go to and the passages of scripture I read each day, how much obedience is there? How much obedience is there? How often do we put it into practice?

Leave and go. How does often God's call to us the same as to Abram? That's the call to saving faith. Leave and go. Leave your sin. Leave your self-centeredness. Leave the world. Leave everyone and everything if I ask you to. Or even leave your desire to move but be prepared to stay where you are if I ask you to. Leave and go. A life of trust, following God wherever he leads, committing ourselves into his hands. Faith means obeying God's call. Leave your sin and go with your Savior. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and without this there is no saving faith. I ask you tonight: have you obeyed God's word? Not just do you read it and do you understand it, but have you obeyed it? God tells you to repent of your sin and to commit yourself to Jesus Christ. Have you done that? Until you do that, you haven't believed, you haven't exercised faith.

Faith means hearing God's word. Faith means obeying God's call. And thirdly and lastly, faith involves believing God's promises. Believing God's promises. Now God didn't need to give Abraham any promises. He was God and he had the right to tell Abraham to do whatever he wanted him to do. He was Abraham's Lord and his Master. He could just have said, "Abraham, do this." He could have just given him a bare command, "Abram, leave your country and go to a land." But God in his kindness and grace and compassion encourages Abraham to faith by giving him, and you can count them if you like and, God willing, we'll look at them next Sabbath evening, by giving him no less than seven wonderful promises, things that God is going to do for him. "I will. I will. I will." You see the kindness of God. He accompanies the call to obedience with marvelous promises of grace and blessing, and it was these promises which made it easier for Abraham to leave because God was offering him something better, something far better than he had,

and it was these promises which kept Abraham going when the road was hard. He had the promises and faith involves believing God's promises.

God has the perfect right to come to you or me and say, "Here's my commandment. Never sin again." Full stop. God would be within his rights to say that, but God doesn't do that. God gives us promise after promise after promise. He promises to save us. He promises to forgive us. He promises to bless us. He promises to give to us everlasting life. He promises to be with us and to meet all our true needs. He surrounds us and encourages us with these promises and these promises are to help us to believe, to motivate us, to get us started. He promises us something far better than all that we leave. There is some sin tonight, perhaps there's someone here and you don't want to leave that sin. That sin is sweet to you. It's part of you. But God promises you something far better, far more worthwhile.

Abraham was given these promises by God and by faith he believed those promises. They were very intangible. They were very unlikely. God said, "And make you a great nation. I'll make your name great. I'll bless those who bless you. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you." That's a very very unlikely promise in human terms, but Abraham believed them. He believed them. "God's going to bless me. God's going to make my name great. God's going to give me a land. God's going to bless everyone on earth, all peoples on earth, rather, through me." He believed the promises.

Saving faith involves believing the promises, that if I come to Jesus, God will forgive me. God will receive me as his child. God will give me everlasting life. God will watch over me. God will supply all my needs. God will use me for his glory. Do we believe the promises? Do we think about the promises? When the way of faith is hard, we need to look to the promises. The writer of the Hebrews says faith is being sure of what we hope for, certain of what we do not see, and the call to us is to believe God's promises. That's why they're given. They're given to evoke faith in us, to call out faith in us so that they will strike an echo in our hearts, a response that says, "Yes, that's true. I believe it."

It is this that keeps us going on the journey of faith, and when we disregard the promises, the way of faith is harder, and it's hard to leave sin, and it's hard to follow Christ. Even our Lord Jesus, we're told, rested on the promises. Hebrews 12:2, "Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross." What kept our Lord going? What encouraged him? What enabled him to persevere? It was the joy that was set before him. He reminded himself of that. He brought it before his mind. He reflected on it. He anticipated it. He looked forward to the joy that was set before him, and it was that joy that was set before him that enabled him to endure the cross.

God sets before you joy. That's what God does. He sets joy before you. It's yours in Christ. The future is one of joy, endless joy, unimaginable joy, joy that we cannot conceive, thrilling, exciting, fulfilling joy forevermore. That joy is set before us and saving faith lays hold on that and looks to the joy and trusts to the joy, and for the joy set before us, we too are enabled to endure.

Faith means hearing God's word. Faith means obeying God's call or God's word. Faith means believing God's promises and God's promises are summarized, wrapped up, concentrated in a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. In him God's promises are yes and amen. When I was a small boy, I suppose many of us were taught the definition of faith, slightly corny, I suppose, but it's not really, it's quite true and quite accurate. F-A-I-T-H, forsaking all, I trust him. Forsaking all, I trust him and here is where our faith is focused. May God strengthen our faith. Amen.

Let us pray.

*O Lord, increase our faith, we pray, that we may be more like Abram, the man of faith, that day by day we may live and act not by our desires, not by our moods, not by the pressures of the world, not by routine, but by faith, by faith each day, by faith each moment. Father, we pray that we may receive and hear your word that we may feed upon it, that your word may nourish our faith. We pray, O God, that we may not lose the sharp edge of commitment and challenge, that we may not just be hearers of the word but that we may be men and women who put the word into practice and who obey your voice. And Lord, help us to give more attention to your promises. How graciously and gently you encouraged Abraham to this great step of commitment. You did not just present him with a blunt challenge, but you made the way so easy for him by your gracious promises. And Father, you have showered your promises upon us, on almost every page of your word there are gold and precious promises to encourage us on the journey of faith. Help us to take them seriously. Help us to believe them and to count upon them, to live on their basis with all our hearts. We thank you, Lord, that for each one of your people there is joy set before us. We pray that the light of that joy may shine into our lives more and more day by day, and enable us to persevere, to endure as our Savior did. In his name we ask it. Amen.*