

The Life of Abraham – The Life of Faith Learning to follow, Genesis 12-13

Today we begin a new series of three talks on one of the greatest characters in the Bible, Abraham. The three talks are:

The life of Faith – learning to follow (Genesis 12-13).

The courage of faith – learning to be victorious (Genesis 14-15).

The dependence of faith – learning to trust (Genesis 16-17).

Abraham is such an important figure in the Old Testament and this is constantly emphasised in the New Testament.

In Matthew 1:1, Jesus is called the, *the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.*

In Mark 12:26, God speaks of Himself as, *...the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*

In Luke 3:8, we read about the oath which God, *...swore to our father Abraham.*

In John 8:57, Jesus says, *Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.* and then adds, *Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.*

In Acts 3:25, Peter reminds his people, *You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

In Acts 7:2, Stephen also reminds the people, *...The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran.*

Paul, in Romans, use the experiences of Abraham to demonstrate righteousness comes by faith not works, *For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. (Romans 4:3).*

In Galatians 3:8, Paul explains that God would justify not only the Jews but the Gentiles by faith, *And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, In you all the nations shall be blessed.*

In Hebrew 11:17, Abraham is a powerful illustration of God giving His Son Jesus, *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son.*

In James 2:23 Abraham is described as, *the friend of God,* James 2:23.
So, let's turn to our chapters,

Genesis 12 verse 1-3 - Abraham is called to follow God in faith.

In Genesis 12 we begin to learn about this remarkable man of faith. Although in our chapters today I am going to refer to Abraham, this name was actually given to him in chapter 17:5. Until then Abraham is called Abram. Abram mean, *exalted father*. Abraham means, *father of a multitude*. The change of name will be explored in our third talk.

God choses Abraham by grace and commands him to start a life of faith. In the words of our title, Abraham learns to follow. But God's command was also one which was filled with promise, *The LORD had said to Abram, Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. 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. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Genesis 12:1-3).*

Hebrews 11 explains that Abraham followed God in faith, not knowing where he was going, *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. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (verse 8-10).*

Faith is about trusting God implicitly. Sometimes we don't know where it will lead us and sometimes, as Abraham discovered in Genesis chapter 22, we know exactly where it will lead. But faith is also about the promises of God. God's eternal purposes are immense and magnificent but He also has purposes for each of His children and we are witnesses in our lives to His faithfulness and blessing.

Genesis 12:4-9 Abraham begins to follow God in faith.

The simplicity of Abraham's faith is seen in verse 4, *So Abram went, as the LORD had told him.*

Abraham also took everything with him, including his nephew Lot. It is worth reflecting on the fact that when God saves us, he also saves what we have and what we are. He saves us spirit, soul and body. We have a new spiritual life and God is able to sanctify our natural abilities and potential and also our material possessions to be used for His glory and our blessing. He changes our relationships with people and the world we live in. We are no longer, for example, a carpenter or an accountant or a husband or a wife but we become a Christian carpenter, a Christian accountant, a Christian husband and a Christian wife. In these relationships we express our faith in God.

So began Abraham's journey of faith. What is very helpful about Abraham's journey of faith is that it was expressed in the context of a physical pilgrimage during which he travelled from place to place. The first place mentioned, in verse 6, is Shechem, and it is here God re-affirms His promise to give Abraham and his children a land. God doesn't just make promises to us, He constantly re-affirms His promise and assures us of what He will accomplish, *...being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ; (Philippians 1:6).*

Abraham's response to God's great promise was to build an altar. The altars built to God in the Old Testament represented places of worship, communion and sacrifice. Faith is strengthened by communion with God. We sometimes refer to the family altar. We don't as Christians build physical altars but we do build into our days times when we are alone, or in our families or in fellowship with the people of God, when we worship and have communion with God and are assured and strengthened His word and His presence with us.

Abraham moved on from Shechem and built another altar between Bethel and Ai. This is an interesting location. Bethel is called *the house of God* by Jacob in chapter 28:17. Ai was the place where the children of Israel suffered a great defeat in Joshua 7 because of Achan's sin of covetousness. Paul writes in Colossians 3:5, *Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.* The exercise of our faith is always in relationship to our faithfulness to God, illustrated by Bethel, in the midst of a world with entirely different values illustrated by Ai.

Genesis 12:9-20 Abraham is diverted from the path of faith.

Abraham next travels towards Negeb (verse 5). Negeb has its root in the Hebrew word for *dry* and also indicates a southerly direction. Notice there is no mention of Abraham building an altar and he finds his faith tested by a famine (verse 10) *Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.*

What Abraham decides to do next did not demonstrate faith in God. Instead it is telling example of what happens when we cease to trust God and begin to trust ourselves. There is no mention of Abraham building an altar in Negeb as a basis for worshiping and communing with God. Compare this with Daniel's daily habit of being in the presence of God (Daniel 6:10). We can all experience our own version of Negeb – a time of spiritual dryness when our fellowship with God diminishes and our direction of travel changes from faith to independence. At such times we are vulnerable to making poor decisions. And so was with Abraham.

His first decision was influenced by the famine he experienced. The decision was go into Egypt. At the beginning of the book of Ruth we have another example of a family who left the land God promised them because of famine. It resulted in Naomi losing her husband and two sons. But God did intervene in remarkable blessing. Often our first reaction in adverse circumstances is to get out of the circumstances as quickly as possible. Sometimes God removes the circumstances. But, at other times, it is God's will for us to pass through the circumstances He has chosen for us and in which He has promised to be with us.

Abraham chose to escape the famine. But he also foresaw another danger. His wife, Sarah, was a very beautiful woman. And Abraham feared the Egyptians would kill him and take Sarah. To overcome this danger Abraham asked Sarah to pretend to be his sister. In the event Sarah was taken into Pharaoh's household and Abraham was looked on favourably by Pharaoh. Abraham's deceit placed his wife in a very vulnerable situation. A husband's first responsibility is to protect his wife at all costs. He didn't do that and his lack of faith placed them both in danger.

Abraham had not acted in faith but Abraham had acted independently of God. When we act outside of what we know the will of God to be we can place ourselves in spiritual, moral and even physical dangers. God has to intervene to protect Abraham and Sarah. He acts in judgement against the house of Pharaoh to make the monarch himself aware he was in danger of taking another man's wife. Pharaoh responds in the fear of God and Abraham is humiliated by his act of deceit. This episode in Abraham's life demonstrates how even great men and women of faith can act when they allow circumstances to interrupt their worship of and fellowship with God which is essential to the life of faith.

Chapter 13 Abraham re-traces the path of faith and grows in faith towards God.

The first four verses of chapter 13 record Abraham re-tracing his steps back, via Negeb, to the place between Bethel and Ai where he had built his altar to the LORD. Here he again called upon the name of the LORD. Abraham's faith is re-established and he walks again in fellowship with God.

We are also told in verse 2 that Abraham had become very rich. You will remember that when Abraham was called by God to go to the land God had promised him, his nephew, Lot, went with him. Lot had also prospered during his time with Abraham.

In verses 5-7 we are told that because Abraham and Lot's people, flocks and herds had grown so much, tensions between the two camps began to develop. These circumstances served to show, in verses 8-9, the reality of Abraham's growing faith in God, *So Abram said to Lot, Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are close relatives. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left.*

Abraham, as the senior partner in the family, had every right to decide where he would go and where Lot would go. But these verses illustrate Abraham's growing faith in God. When he went down to Egypt, Abraham was not trusting in God but in himself. But in these verses he gives Lot the opportunity to choose where he would go and leaves the outcome to God. He didn't put himself first, nor do I believe, did he put Lot first. He put God first. He believed the God who had called him and kept him would direct him on the next part of his journey of faith. It is a reminder of what we have in Proverbs 3:5-6, *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.*

But if we are encouraged by the development of Abraham's faith, Lot's behaviour serves as a very serious warning about how we can be seduced by the world we live in. *Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company. (verse 10-11).*

There were two things which defined Lot's thinking. The first was what he saw with his eyes. It was the same with Eve in Genesis 3:6. And John warns us about loving the world in 1 John 2:15-17, *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.*

The second thing was what he saw in his mind. Lot remembered what Egypt was like. Egypt in the Bible, and particularly in the book of Exodus, is often used as an illustration of a way of life in opposition to God based on idolatry and materialism. It has been said, *You can take a man out of Yorkshire but you can't take Yorkshire out of a man*, Lot had left Egypt, but Egypt was still in his heart. He didn't ask Abraham's advice or pray about his decision he just went for it and God sometimes allows us to have the things we desire, *And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul. Psalm 106:15.* We should not forget that Abraham took Lot in Egypt and put him in a place which deeply affected his thinking and actions. This is an important lesson. The results of choices we make are often not confined to ourselves but also affect those close to us. This is why the small and great choices we make in life should be taken prayerfully and carefully. So Lot chose the Jordan Valley and started what was to become a very bitter journey. Abraham continued his pilgrim journey of faith.

The departure of Lot also marked another key moment in Abraham's journey of faith when God speaks again to Abraham, *The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length*

and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you. So Abram went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he pitched his tents. There he built an altar to the LORD.

We see a progression in the way God speaks to Abraham. In Genesis 12:1-3 we read, *Now the LORD had said to Abram: Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.* In these verses God calls Abraham to follow Him in faith. God also makes several promises. First, He promises Abraham a land. Then God promises to make him the head of a great nation and to make his name great. God also promises to bless Abraham, to protect him and to bless the world through him.

We can see parallels with what God would do through His own Son Jesus Christ. Through Christ work's He is building His church, He has a name above every name, (Philippians 2:9-11), He is the Saviour of the world and source of all blessing. The result of God speaking to Abraham was that he obeyed God's call. And, in the words of Hebrews 11:8, *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.* After Abraham arrived in the land God had promised him, God re-affirms His promise to his descendants in verse 7 of chapter 12, *Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, To your descendants I will give this land.*

Abraham's response is to build altars so he could worship God and call on His name. We have discovered that after such a good start Abraham is diverted from the path of faith to go into Egypt. But he leaves Egypt to return to the place he had left re-establishing his altar between Bethel and Ai. Here it is that Abraham and Lot separate and God speaks again to Abraham. This time God speaks to Abraham in a more expansive and detailed way about His promises. It is almost as if God is beside Abraham and saying to him, *Come with me and let me show you what I have promised.* He invites him to look in every direction. There is a similar scene at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, when God showed Moses the promised land. *Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is across from Jericho. And the LORD showed him all the land of Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the South, and the plain of the Valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. Then the LORD said to him, This is the land of which I swore to give Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, I will give it to your descendants. I have caused you to see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there. (Deuteronomy 34:1-4).* I remember many years ago visiting the Shalom Meir Tower in Tel Aviv. On the viewing tower at the top of this skyscraper I remember feeling like Moses as I looked over the land of Israel in all directions.

In Hebrew 2:16 we read, *For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham.* This can be translated, *He does not take angels by the hand but He does take the seed of Abraham by the hand.* The writer is demonstrating how close God comes to us through Christ – taking us by the hand. I think this was the experience of Abraham in chapter 13. God was taking His friend by the hand and saying, *Let me show you the reality of my promises.* Abraham is described as the the friend of God, *Are You not our God, who drove out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel, and gave it to the descendants of Abraham Your friend forever? (2 Chronicles 20:7) But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, The descendants of Abraham My friend (Isaiah 41:8). And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. And he was called the friend of God (James 2:23).*

Abraham's experience of friendship with God gives us an insight into what the Lord Jesus meant when He describes His disciples as His friends in John 15, *Greater love has no one than this, than*

to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you, (John 15:13-15). Notice the Lord's words *...if you do whatever I command you.* Abraham's friendship with God grew as his faith and obedience grew. I think our friendship with the Lord deepens in the same way. So God invited Abraham to view the land he and his descendants were promised. He also promised those descendants would be a vast company. God invited Abraham to look into the future. Finally, God invites Abraham to walk the land and enjoy what God was giving him, *Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.* Our chapter ends with Abraham building another altar, *So Abram went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he pitched his tents. There he built an altar to the LORD.* The name Hebron is associated with the idea of lasting friendship and fellowship. As we have begun to trace Abraham's journey of faith, we have a sense of a man in fellowship and communion with God. A man who built altars in places where he worshipped and communed with God; places where he learned to grow in faith; places where he was transformed into a man through whom God's blessings flowed.

Last week I was in Switzerland with some friends. During the week we took the train journey up to Rochers de Naye above Montreux. We had to wait sometime for the train. And the journey was a slow one and we stopped at every small station. When we reached the last station we had to climb to a mountain ridge. But when we arrived the weariness of the journey disappeared as we stood above Lac Lemman looking at the wonderful views of mountains and lakes and the valley below. Our journey of faith will take time. There will be many stops, many disappointments, many challenges but many encouragements. At the journey's end we shall understand that God has always been taking us by the hand to bring us into all the blessings of all he has promised us.

*Eye has not seen, nor ear heard,
Nor have entered into the heart of man
The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.
(1 Corinthians 2:9).*

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on The Life of Abraham – The Life of Faith, Learning to follow, Genesis chapters 12-13 talk number T1112.

The New King James version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated

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