

I would like for you to imagine with me... for just a moment... that you and some friends are out and exploring caves along the Oregon coast. Neither you or your friends had bothered to check the tide schedule... so no one knew that the tide was coming in... and not going out. You find a deep cave that goes back quite a way. It looks dark... but your cell phone will provide you with enough light. Being the adventurer that you are... you and your friends decide to see what's inside. ... You aren't but 50 feet inside the dark cavern... when you feel water at your feet. But you think the tide moves rather slowly and you probably have a lot of time. ... But you thought wrong. ... Soon the water is up to your knees and is rapidly increasing. Now you are further into the cave. Off in the distance you see a ray of sunlight streaming into the cave... through what certainly must be a hole to the surface. But it is deeper still... into the cave. You and your friends decide that this is your best chance... so you proceed further into the cave. When you reach the source of the light... you discover that it is too high for any of you to reach... and the opening is too small for you to fit through. The sea water continues to rise. But wait! One of your exploring partners is small enough and might fit. You and two others exhaust all the strength you have to lift her up... until she could grab hold of something solid enough to lift herself the rest of the way. It worked! She was free. Her exit was right alongside of Highway 101. She was tremendously blessed! Wew! She almost died.

Now... just imagine that she thought the whole point of this effort was so that she alone would be saved. Grateful for her safety... it never even occurred to her that the effort was to get her out to the surface... in order to bring help and equipment... to bring the others out as well.

Unthinkable...? (How cold-hearted!) It would never happen...?

Let me challenge you with a thought that you might be every-bit as guilty of committing this improbable act. (You see) God blesses you and I... in order that we might be a blessing to others. But we are often guilty of merely receiving His blessings... as though that is the end of it... as though that is all God intended.

This morning we come to a passage in Genesis 12... where God promises to give great blessings to Abraham. And it is unmistakably tied to the reason "SO THAT he would bless others".... (You can't miss it.)

That is exactly how God works. He blesses us... so that we will bless others. Make no mistake about this. ... AND... He blesses us when we place our faith in Him. This is another clear insight from our passage this morning... (and the weeks to follow.) Abraham shows us what a life of faith looks like. Do you wish to enjoy the blessing of God? Then learn from Abraham how to live by faith.

Abraham and Sarah were not perfect... but their walk was generally characterized by faith (and faithfulness.) ... When they sinned... they suffered for it... and the Lord was always ready to forgive when they repented. ... "The victorious Christian life, is a series of new beginnings." As we study the life of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis (over the next several weeks)... we will learn what faith is and how to walk by faith. We will discover that:

When you trust the Lord, no test is impossible and no failure is permanent. **[*-SELAH!*]**

Faith is not based on feeling... though some emotions may be involved.

Hebrews 11:7 (ESV)

*By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, **in reverent fear** constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*

Emotions are often involved... but true faith is based on the Word of God.

Romans 10:17 (ESV)

...faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

God spoke to Abraham and told him what He would do *for* him and *through* him if he would trust and obey. ... God's covenant (which we will study today)... gave Abraham and Sarah the faith and strength they needed for their lifelong journey.

Last week... as we studied Genesis 11... we were introduced to Abraham. We learned that God had called Abraham to go to a place where God would show him.

Now... over in the New Testament... in the book of Acts (Acts 7:2-3) we read in Stephen's sermon... that Abraham received this summons not in Haran... (where he and his father had migrated until his father died)... but **before** they went to live in Haran. ... God called Abraham while they were still in Ur of the Chaldees.

This indicates... as I noted last week... that there was some **delinquency** in Abraham's responding to God's call... when he stopped at Haran instead of continuing on to Canaan.

So many people start out well... but sooner or later they take one of the devil's detours and get sidetracked or stopped. Abraham almost got stopped permanently in Haran... but by the grace of God... he started up again and finished his trip to Canaan. So this morning we will be looking at (what I believe) is a **second** call given Abraham... which "kick-started" him again... and brought him the rest of the way... into Canaan.

The reading of the Hebrew text for our passage (which we are about to read) simply says "The Lord said to Abram..." ... It would need to be written differently (in what is called a *past perfect tense* – "The Lord **had** said...") if it was referring to the call made to Abram back in Ur.

But there is another grammatical reason for seeing this as a **second** call given to Abram. In the Hebrew text we find the little word "waw" connected to "the Lord." It would not be there if it was referring to a previous call that was made back in Ur of the Chaldees. "waw" here means: "*here is something new...*" It means "*and also*" or "*now also*." "Now also God said to Abram..." ... So... look at the final verse of genesis 11.

"The days of Terah were 205 years and Terah died in Haran..." Chapter 12... (the first word is – "waw") ... "Terah died... Now also God said to Abram..." ... (And what did He say...?) He said "Get out!" "Leave!" "I am going to bless you... SO THAT you will bring blessings to others..."

But you should also notice that the weight of this second call... seems to strike at the very **distractions** that made Abram delinquent in obeying his first call (back in Ur.) The comfort of familiarity was his distraction.

“Haran” (where Abram was)... also happens to be the name of his brother who died earlier. Haran may have been settled by Abram’s brother... but at the very least... Haran was a family name... and the people they came to live among in the place called “Haran” had probably afforded them the comfort of being among relatives. So Abram will be called to exercise faith... and lay aside the comfort of his familiar culture and family.

Genesis 12:1

Please notice how the term “Canaan” has not appeared anywhere... yet. God’s order to “Get out!” did not include the specifics of where. God said, “*I will let you know when you get there...*” ... He was not told that Canaan was the land where God was taking him... and at this point... there has been no mention that this land would be given to him. God just says... “*Get up and go to a land I will show you...*” “*I command you to go forth with closed eyes... and I forbid you to inquire where I am about to lead you... until... having renounced all your familiar comforts... you shall be totally dependent on Me.*” Abram was asked to believe and obey the bare word of God—the *verbum nudum* as Calvin has it — “the naked word of the Lord.”

This call to forsake all is very much like the call of the gospel. ... The *call* of Abram shows us the *starting-point* of the life of faith. The first requirement is *separation* from the world and from our place in it by nature. ... The gospel calls us to rest all our hope on the word of Christ... and nothing else! Jesus said,

Matthew 10:37 (ESV)

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me,

and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

...and

Mark 8:35 (ESV)

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

The gospel calls us to rest all our hope on the word of Christ - and nothing else!

When Jesus calls us... He does not guarantee the future or even tell us what it will be like. ... He does promise that He will take us to be with Him... which is the ultimate land! ... He does promise forgiveness and inner peace. ... He does promise that He will be with us through thick and thin. ... He does promise our ultimate good.

But Jesus does not say that it will be smooth here on earth. He does not say that your problems will be solved... in your timing or manner. Nor does He promise a life of peace and ease.

If you are looking for these kinds of up-front promises before turning to Christ... you will never get them. And if you persist in your requirements... you will never come to Christ. **He calls you to trust His word alone.** God may be trying to lead you to a place of greater service and usefulness for Him. Don't let the comfort and security of your present position make you miss God's plan for your life.

Genesis 12:2

OK... God's promise here... that Abram would become a great nation... must have seemed like such an **assault** on Abram's intelligence and sense of reality. Abram was childless and Sarai was barren. This was such a painful situation for anyone... especially during this time period. ... Abram was being asked to believe... in the dark! ...in the midst of a very painful circumstance. ... But... what is even more difficult... Abram was promised not merely to become a "great people"... but instead... "a great **nation**!" ("OK... God... Now you are really heaping it on here!")

And that was not all... there was yet... even more! ... God promised to make Abram's "name great." Ironically... this is what the builders of the tower of Babel sought — "*let us make a name for ourselves*" (they said to each other.) But by faith... Abram was going to get... what **never** truly comes by self-serving effort.

Now... lets stop and consider this promise from our current day... when we can see how it was fulfilled. Abraham is probably the world's **most famous** man. Even in this day of radio... television... YouTube and internet... probably more people have heard of Abraham... than of anyone else. More have heard of Abraham than have heard of the President of the United States... or of any head of state... or of any movie star... or of any athlete. The three great religions of the world go back to Abraham: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. There are literally millions of people in Asia and Africa today who have heard of Abraham... but have never heard of the ones who make the headlines in our country. Abraham was a great man... in terms of being famous. ...And I don't need to say anything about God's promise that the Jews would be a great nation of people. (They are... despite so many attempts to wipe them out!)

Now... take another look with me at the final phrase of verse two... “so that you will be a blessing.” This is actually written as a command. Do not make the mistake... as so many have... and see this as a promise of what God will do. It is not a fourth blessing that God promised. In other words God is not saying “Abraham if you go... I will do four things. I will: 1) make you a great nation... 2) bless you... 3) make your name great... and 4) make you a blessing...” (You see)... this last one... #4 is not a promise. It is a command.

The call of Abraham... that we are studying today... involves two commands. They are: “Go” and “Be a blessing.” After the first command... it is followed by three promises: 1) “I will make you a great nation... 2) I will bless you... and 3) I will make your name great... SO THAT... (and what comes next is written in the Hebrew imperative voice... in other words... as a command...) “*you will be...*” or “*You are to be a blessing...*” Genesis 12:1-2 say: “Go... and receive these three blessings... and then... be a blessing to others...”

God *blesses* us that we might be a *blessing* to others, and His great concern is that the whole world might be blessed. *The missionary mandate of the church does not begin with John 3:16 or Matthew 28:18-20. It begins with God's covenant with Abraham.* We are *blessed* that we might be a *blessing*.

(So God issued two commands... and both are immediately followed by three promises. Genesis 12:1 gave the command to “go”... followed by 3 promises in verse 2. Then... the end of verse 2 gave the command “to be a blessing”... and this is followed by three promises... which takes up all of

verse 3. ... That is how the call to Abraham is arranged... ("Command-promise-promise-promise"... "Command-promise-promise-promise"...)

Genesis 12:3

Those who bless Abram will be blessed. But "*him who dishonors you*" [literally, "*treats you lightly*"... "*discounts you and the covenant I am making with you*"]... *I will curse,*" says God. That is... there will be heightened... disproportionate punishment... for not taking God's covenant with Abraham seriously.

Abram saw this principle worked out in his own life... or soon thereafter. Later on... in Genesis... we will see that Melchizedek... and (even later)... Abimelech were blessed for honoring Abram. ... But Hagar was cut off from Abram's family for despising Sarah. ... And the Canaanites... who so distressed and persecuted Israel... are no more.

I believe that this promise to Abraham is still in full-force today. Any nation currently on earth... will be blessed or cursed... depending on how they treat the descendants of Abraham. If we bless Israel... God blesses these United States. If we treat Israel with the attitude of anti-Semitism (which is beginning to really grow in America)... or indifference... God will unleash His curses on our nation. I am very concerned for our nation right now.

Now as we move into the next section of this morning's passage... we see Abraham's performance of his call. Genesis 12:1-3 shows us what the call was... while verses 4-9 show us what the performance of that call was.... We are going to see that he stepped out with incredible faith. He does much better with this second call... than he did with the first. But his obedience (this time) is certainly not without fault.

Genesis 12:4-9

The dedication is seen in both his submission... and his stamina. ...

First... his *submission*. "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him"
(Genesis 12:4).

Abraham submitted to God's will. That is the beginning of dedication. There is no such thing as dedication spiritually without submission to God's will.

A great many people think that Abram left a terrible place in Ur of the Chaldees and came to a land of corn and wine... a land of milk and honey... where everything was just lovely. ... They think that Abram really bettered his life... just by coming to this land. Don't you believe it. That is not what the Bible says.

Through archaeology... we know that Ur of the Chaldees had a very high civilization during this time. ... In fact... (J Vernon McGee says)... Abram and Sarai might well have had a bathtub in their home! ... Ur was a great and prosperous city. ... Abram left all of that and came into the land of Canaan, (verse 6) "*and at that time Canaanites were in the land.*"

The Canaanite was not civilized. ... He was a barbarian and a heathen... if there ever was one. ... Abram's purpose in coming to Canaan was certainly not because Canaan looked more attractive to him. He came in obedience to God's command.

Second... his stamina.

Abraham kept going this time until he reached his destination. Dedication will manifest itself in stamina. Quitters lack stamina.

Abraham's stamina is seen in "*Abram went*" (Genesis 12:4), "*and they set out*" (Genesis 12:5), "*Abram passed through the land*" (Genesis 12:6), and "*Abram journeyed on*" (Genesis 12:9) ... and also in verse 9... "still going..." "Still going" says it best regarding his great stamina. ... Abraham did not enter Canaan and stop just over the border line... he passed through all the land. ... His dedication for doing God's will was emphasized by his great stamina in doing God's will.

But there is also **disobedience** in Abram's performing. "*And Lot went with him*" (Genesis 12:4 says). Abraham's performing the call... was not faultless... for Lot was allowed to be part of the group. That was contrary to the Divine summons which said Abraham was to leave all his relatives behind. ... This disobedience later came back to haunt Abraham. ... We are going to see... in future chapters of Genesis... Lot was a **big** problem for Abraham. And later on in the story of the Jews exodus from Egypt... Lot's descendants became a big problem for Israel. All of this was because Abraham did not obey **completely**. ... Failure to obey completely can cause many long-term problems.

Abram and Sarai were not the only ones... along with Lot... who went to Canaan. Verse five uses the phrase "*and the people that they acquired in Haran...*" Some writers say that these were slaves that Abram acquired. God was already blessing Abram... making him wealthy enough to have several slaves. But this is probably **not** what is being said.

Hebrew scholars and the tradition of Rabbi's translate the phrase as "*the souls that they had won in Haran*," arguing that this refers to making proselytes. Abram had been actively sharing his story and faith in the Lord. ... God may... or may not have (already) been blessing Abram with wealth. But to me... it seems as though Abram was already being a blessing to others... and sharing his new faith.

Genesis 12:6

Here was the testing of faith: Abram reached the land... but he could not settle down within it. ... He simply had to pass through the land as a *pilgrim*... because there was opposition there (the Canaanites).

Think for a moment: when Abram arrived in Canaan... what was he expecting to find? ... A land uninhabited and unpossessed... a free land ready to be claimed by the first pioneer to settle within its borders? ... Or... was Abram expecting the land to be settled and possessed by people?

Scripture does not say... but when Abram crossed the border of Canaan... he found a land already inhabited. ... The Canaanites... a godless nation of ferocious barbaric people... were already there.... Abram faced a formidable enemy if he began to claim the land. ... He could easily see that he was not going to possess the land... within the foreseeable future. ... All kinds of questions must have flashed across his mind. He must have been gripped with... uncertainty... hesitation... misgivings... and questioning. ... Could it be that he had misread God... that he had made a mistake?

Abram's faith was tested... severely tested. (The faith of this great pioneer for God was tested to the *nth* degree.) He was in the land... but he could not yet possess it.

There is a beautiful analogy for the believer... in this experience of Abram. Just as Abram reached the promised land... but did not yet physically possess it... so the believer reaches the promised land of heaven immediately when they are saved here on earth... but we do not yet physically possess it.

Ephesians 2:5-6 (ESV)

⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

God counts the believer as already in heaven. ... The believer is not physically in heaven... but he is as good as there. ... God has promised heaven to us... and what God promises always takes place. ... So... the believer is counted as being in heaven (as already there.)

But the believer's faith in the promised land of heaven is constantly tested just as Abram's was. ... In fact, the believer is never free from enemies who oppose his inheriting the promised land of heaven. ... It is seldom easy to obey the commands of God. ... To obey God you must often have to experience scorning... danger... and mistreatment.... from others.

But... simply stated... the true believer knows what Abram knew: he is only a pilgrim upon earth. The promised land of heaven is his eternal destiny.

The mention of "the oak of Moreh" strikes an ominous reminder of this. Moreh means "teacher, oracle giver." ... The great tree of Moreh was the place where the Canaanites assembled... to hear the oracles that pagan soothsayers received... from interpreting the rustling of the oak leaves.

And it was here at the great tree of Moreh... that God did speak. In contrast to the false messages of the soothsayers... God really did speak to Abram.

Genesis 12:7

Obedience leads to new assurance and new promises from God.

John 7:17 (ESV)

If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God....

What comfort it must have brought when Abraham and Sarah had this fresh revelation of God as they arrived in a strange and dangerous land.

And now... for the first time... it is finally revealed that God would give this land (**NOT TO ABRAM**)... but to his descendants. Abram... himself... would not possess it... but his offspring would.

Abram dwelt in the land as a temporary settler (a "sojourner" or "a pilgrim"), waiting for the promises. But since the Canaanites had all the good... fertile lands... Abram had to keep moving his camp (by stages.) That is what we read in verse 9... He continued down toward the Negev... the dry south desert... where he could live... and still be in the land.

Genesis 12:8

Abraham was prompt to build an altar to worship God once he entered the land. In the first place he settled down (Shechem)... he built an altar. Then when he moved to Bethel... he again built an altar.

These altars were built in plain sight in the land of Canaan. All the Canaanites could see that Abraham worshiped differently than they did. Abraham was not a secret disciple. ... Abraham was not ashamed to confess his faith... even in the vile heathen land of Canaan. Abram was being obedient to his command that we saw in verse 2. Abram was being a blessing to others.

We are overloaded with secret disciples today—folk who are careful to do nothing that would cause other people to suspect they are a Christian. These secret disciples fear scorn and embarrassment and rejection for being a Christian. Such folk need to read:

Matthew 10:32-33 (ESV)

³² So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, ³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

In verse 8... it says that Abram built an alter “*and called on the name of the Lord...*” This phrase (“*and called on the name of the Lord...*”) has a special meaning. It is not just worship... given to the Lord. Its meaning is to proclaim the nature of God before others. When Martin Luther translated this verse from Hebrew into his language (which was German)... he wrote “*Abram built an alter and preached...*” Luther probably got it right. Abram preached the name (or the nature) of God.

And when he set up his alter at the Oak of Moreh... this was a known gathering place - probably a where Canaanite priests gave instruction in their ritual and myth. Thus, Abram proclaimed the name of Yahweh next to a Canaanite holy place, a place of pagan worship and instruction. This is what he probably had been doing in Haran to gain the proselytes who came with him.

Abram was blessed... in order to be a blessing.

Philip Yancey's book *What's So Amazing About Grace?* gives a powerful call for Christians to view themselves (not just as beneficiaries of grace)... but as agents of grace. We are to be dispensers... not collectors. ... We were not designed to be cisterns... but aqueducts.

The covenant God made with Abram... not only made Abram and his family recipients of revelation and grace... but set them up as agents of revelation and grace. Through them all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

The grace that God brings into our lives is a grace that should be evident in us as we live lives of grace. As Yancey points out... this means that we should stand ready to forgive as we have been forgiven... to be charitable in our attitudes toward those we disagree with... to exude grace to everyone around us. Unfortunately... most of us would have to agree with him that such grace is often not associated with Christianity.

Genesis 12:9

The life of faith must never stand still; for if your feet are going, your faith is growing. ... Comfortable Christianity is opposite the life of faith.... If you have been blessed by God... are you blessing others...?