

The Faith of Abraham
Genesis 12

Turn to Genesis 12. I'll do stories for a while this summer. In Gen 12, God picked one person, Abraham, and said, "I pick you. I will bless you, I will make you into a great nation, and through you I will bring blessing to all the nations, to everyone on earth." So Abraham and Sarah are an important place to start.

The Journey Begins - Gen 11:30-32

[Terah was Abraham's father.] Sarai Abram's wife was childless; she was not able to conceive. 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. Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Harran.

Terah, Abram's father, left Ur of the Chaldeans and headed for Canaan, but he stopped in Harran, which was about half way to Canaan. Terah settled there in Harran.

God took Abraham the rest of the way to Canaan. It almost sounds like God called Terah first, but Terah did not finish. The Bible says God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans, not out of Harran. Abraham went the first half with his father's family, and the last half on his own.

Abraham's Call and Promised Blessing – Gen 12:1-4

Gen 12 - The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household 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. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So Abraham went, as the Lord had told him.

The last story in Genesis before this is the tower of Babylon. There do not seem to be any people serving God after that time. It seems that God called Abraham out of the blue. Abraham did not know the One True God before this call. It seems God just showed up in Abraham's life.

And the first thing God told him was what to do. *Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.* If Abraham did not go, the rest of this would not happen. But Abraham went. Abraham is called a hero of faith, and that's the truth.

But God did not say, "put your trust in me." No, God said "Go." Hebrews 11 says *by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place he would receive, and he did not know where he was going.* In the Bible, there is usually no difference between faith and action.

Jesus called the first disciples to leave their boats and follow him. They had to trust the Lord quite a bit to leave and follow him. But Jesus did not ask for trust, he began with actions.

And then this remarkable seven-part blessing: “(1) *I will make you into a great nation, and (2) I will bless you; (3) I will make your name great, and (4) you will be a blessing. (5) I will bless those who bless you, and (6) whoever curses you I will curse; and (7) all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*” So, Abraham went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him.

In short, God said, “I will take very good care of you, Abraham, I will make you into a great nation, even though your wife is barren and childless. And this is important: all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. I’m doing this with you, Abraham, because I am completely resolved to bless *all peoples on earth*, and I will do that through you.”

People, everything you and I have received from God through the gospel came through this. Christ himself, the Holy Spirit, salvation, all that we get from our faith, is God blessing the nations through Abraham.

12:4b-5 Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Abraham and Sarah worshipped only the God of the Bible, but it was a big group of people, and the gods of Abraham’s ancestors came along in that group. We hear about that once in a while.

Another Promise – The Land

12:6-9 Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

Abraham and Sarah did not have any children, and no reason there to be optimistic. But Abraham kept his thoughts about this to himself. God told him his offspring would get that land, so he built an altar to honour and thank God, and to remember the promise. Faith caused Abraham to build an altar, to honour God’s promise, which Abraham would not see in his life.

From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.

Abraham and Sarah in Egypt – If we are Faithless, He remains Faithful 12:10-20

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. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I

know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.” (Sarai, you can save my life.) When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman. And when Pharaoh’s officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels.

But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram’s wife Sarai. So Pharaoh summoned Abram. “What have you done to me?” he said. “Why didn’t you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!” Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.

Abraham is a desert sheik, a clan leader, and this is dismal. He sacrificed Sarah’s honour, and thus also his own, as well as God’s plan. Later (Gen 20) Abraham told a different king, “when I left my father’s house, I said to Sarah, ‘*wherever we go*, Sarah, show your love for me by telling them you’re my sister, so they don’t kill me.’” And, folks, she did, everywhere they went.

Pharaoh’s Wife

Sarah compromised herself regularly for his sake. “Wherever we go.” In the ancient eastern world, Abraham could not have been a bigger wimp. Why? Because he was afraid, and didn’t trust God.

Pharaoh said, “I took her to be my wife.” For a time, Sarah was in fact Pharaoh’s wife. How did Abraham think this would end? She was gone, he gave her away. They were both in a mess.

God had said, *I will bless you, Abraham; I will make you into a great nation. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse.* In Egypt, those words from God did not count, not to Abraham.

Furthermore, it sounds like Pharaoh would have honoured the marriage. Abraham’s request seems unnecessary. He asks, “why didn’t you tell me?” It seems that Pharaoh would have left Sarah alone if he’d known she was Abraham’s wife. But even if Pharaoh would have decided to kill Abraham, would Abraham have been excused? Never.

Fear Makes us Act like Atheists

When we are afraid, we can act like atheists. Suddenly God is not in our story at all, he’s gone. Would God let Pharaoh kill Abraham? Never chance. God said, “I will make you into a great nation.” God had plans, and Abraham knew it. Abraham threw away his wife, his marriage, and God’s promise. He thought this would keep him alive longer.

Right at the beginning of Revelation, Jesus told John, “I hold the keys of death and the grave.” Jesus has those keys. If Jesus does not open the death door, we’re not going. If Jesus opens the death door, we’re going.

And the story of the two witnesses in Rev 11 makes clear that until our service to God is complete, we cannot be stopped, we are divinely protected. Once our service to God is over, so are we. No power on earth can either rush that or delay that. Very good things to know.

Pharaoh himself and his household had severe plagues. God was being faithful to Abraham and Sarah, and blessing them, even though Abraham was faithless. God took care of them, got them back together.

All Peoples Blessed Through You

But Abraham was destined to bring blessing to all the nations. Did Abraham bring blessing to Pharaoh? No. Abraham brought severe plagues on Pharaoh himself and his household. Later in Genesis, Joseph was in Egypt and Joseph trusted God, and Joseph brought great blessing to Pharaoh and to Egypt. That could have been Abraham’s story. Later it was, but not this time.

God Blessed Abraham

Abraham still came out of this blessed by God. When Pharaoh took Sarah to be his wife, believing that Sarah was Abraham’s sister, Pharaoh made Abraham rich, gave him all kinds of stuff: *sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels.*

When Abraham left Egypt with Sarah, Pharaoh said Abraham should take it all the rest of this with him. Why? Because God said “I will bless you,” and he meant it. If we are faithless, he remains faithful, he cannot deny himself.

How can Abraham show so much faith in the first story of him setting out to obey God’s call, and show so little faith when he comes into Egypt? I don’t know, but I am like that, and except for Jesus of Nazareth, we’re all like that. That’s what God works with.

Comfort for Us

There is real comfort in this story. The problem with fear, and why the Bible warns against fear, is that it can produce faithless living. Feeling scared is not the problem. Faithless living, faithless actions: that’s the problem. But even there, God is faithful. God still works, protects, helps, restores. That is so good. We forget about his promises, but he does not forget his promises. Isn’t that so good? He does not forget his promises, even when we do.

A Story about God

We read God's promises to Abraham in Gen 12:2-3. Every story in the rest of Genesis, right to the end of Genesis 50, shows God keeping those promises. Genesis 12 at the core is not a story about Abraham, or about being faithful or faithless. We need to understand Abraham and Sarah and faithfulness and faithlessness to understand the God story.

God made a promise to bless that family, because he wanted to bring blessing to all the nations. The rest of Genesis shows God in one way or another keeping that promise. Good things and bad things happen in that family, as they do in all families. Lots of interesting family stories.

But God has decided to do something through that family line, and that's the real story, God carrying out his plans through that story. And we, here, right now, are under that blessing. We are among the peoples that God blessed. This is a God story, and it has spread to include us. Amen.

PRAYER God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, thank you for this huge blessing on Abraham at the beginning of Genesis 12, thank you for your faithfulness to Abraham and Sarah, and to their whole family line. And 4000 years later, the wealth of that kindness has spread to us gathered here this morning. We have been included.

Oh God, we all sometimes show faith like Abraham did, leaving and going because you told him to. And we sometimes are faithless, as Abraham was, and we forget your promises. We bring troubles on ourselves and others. Lead us away from this. Help us show faith by our actions, more and more and more. May your blessing on us include this.

Thank for your great faithfulness. God, you're unbelievable! When we are faithless, you remain faithful, and we are so grateful. Glory and praise and thanks to you forever and ever. Amen.

BENEDICTION The Lord bless us and keep us; the Lord make his face shine on us and be gracious to us; the Lord turn his face toward us and give us peace. Amen. Go in God's peace, to love and serve the Lord.