



FOOTSTEPS OF FAITH: THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM FAITH'S MAD ADVENTURE BEGINS

Genesis 11:27-12:9

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Dr. Todd Wilson, Senior Pastor

²⁷ Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. ²⁸ Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. ²⁹ And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. ³⁰ Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

³¹ Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. ³² The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran.

^{12:1} Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵ And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord. ⁹ And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

Introduction

On Friday I cut my grass. It's a surprisingly rewarding experience. I especially enjoy it when I have help from my twins, Addis and Rager. They both have their own lawnmowers, and love following behind me while we cut the grass together.

Sometimes they get too close to the lawnmower. At other times, they take a break from all the hard work and sit down in my path. But most often, they love following in their father's footsteps.

Christians are to follow in the footsteps of another. Only these footsteps are the footsteps of faith, and the one we're to follow is a man named Abraham. In fact, the Bible says he is the father of all who walk by faith (Rom. 4:11). And that everyone who lives his life by faith is a son of Abraham (Gal. 3:7).

Now, some of you may be like Huck Finn, who when his caretaker read to him after supper read to him from the Old Testament and about Moses, Huck was initially quite interested, indeed "in a sweat to find out all about him; but by and by," he says, "she let out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him; because I don't take no stock in dead people."

Perhaps you "don't take no stock in dead people," like Moses, or like Abraham. But you should. For when we follow in the footsteps of faith, we are justified freely by God's grace, as was Abraham; we receive the blessing of Abraham, the presence of God's Spirit in our lives (Gal. 3:14); and we are given a right to Abraham's inheritance, we become heirs of the world (Rom. 4:13).

Abraham Leaves Country, Kin and Creature Comforts—All By Faith

When we first meet Abraham, he's a man on the move. He joins Terah, his father, in leaving his hometown of Ur of the Chaldeans. He goes with his wife, Sarah, and takes his nephew, Lot, along with him. And together they head northwest, along a travel route, toward the land of Canaan, stopping along the way in a city called Haran, about four hundred miles from Ur.

But what motivates Abraham to leave his country, his kin and most of his creature comforts? This sounds like a mad adventure. What's driving him?

I think we can safely conclude that Abraham wasn't eager to leave Ur of the Chaldeans. This wasn't a backwater village or some sandy, sleepy Bedouin outpost. It was a cosmopolitan center in the ancient world. The prophet Isaiah refers to it as "the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans" (13:19). This was a place of glory and would have been a desirable place to live.

We can also safely say that Abraham wasn't on a quest to find God either. In fact, the Bible tells us, in Joshua 24:2 that Abraham and his whole family "served other gods." Abraham wasn't a worshiper of God; in all likelihood, he was a worshiper of the moon. He was a pagan, an idolater.

So, then, what happened?

The Book of Hebrews tells us plainly: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going" (11:8). Abraham left his country, his kin and his other creature comforts—all *by faith*.

Whence Faith?

But where does faith come from? How do you get faith? How does a person come to trust in God? What kind of experience or encounter, what sort of idea or insight, creates this thing we call faith?

We know it's not enough to have simply grown up in the church or going to church. We also know it's not enough to know the core beliefs of the Christian faith or the key teachings of Jesus. Furthermore, we know that it's not enough to have gone through tough times or need the support of a higher power; lots of people go through just that and come out on the other side without genuine faith.

Don't misunderstand me though. It's not that right ideas are unimportant, or that you can have genuine faith without true beliefs about God. You can't.

But, by the same token, you can't come to faith on the basis of true beliefs *alone*. There must be something more. But what is that something more?

From the Glory of Ur to the God of Glory

The first Christian martyr, Stephen, tells the story this way. "Brothers and fathers, hear me. *The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham* when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you'" (Acts 7:2-3).

This is what turned Abraham's life upside-down, and set him on the mad adventure of faith: *he met God in Ur of the Chaldeans*.

This is the key to faith. This is source of faith. This is what creates faith in your life and mine: when the God of glory appears to us.

For the appearance of the God of glory *unmasks our worthless idols*. God's presence unmasks the counterfeit gods you serve and worship, thus winning your trust, your confidence, and your faith.

But the appearance of the God of glory also *unveils joyful hope*. The beauty and radiance of God's presence in our lives, not only displaces lesser things we cling on to—things like money, sex, and power—but it also reveals to us a more compelling hope for the future, one we could have never imagined.

Faith's mad adventure begins when you see something even more compelling than what can be seen with your eyes. Faith begins when you come face to face with the God of glory.

Stir Up My Soul to Lay Hold of Thee

Countless Christians have found their mad adventure of faith begins when they see the glory of God, and so follow in the footsteps of Abraham.

You may know about Henry Martyn, who was converted during his student days in Cambridge, England, under the ministry of Charles Simeon, one of the great evangelical ministers of the nineteenth century. He was a missionary in India, and then in what is modern day Iran, before dying in his early thirties.

Henry Martyn had been deeply moved hearing about the great missionary to China, William Carey, and the remarkable story of the missionary in North America, David Brainerd. So moved by their lives of faith, Martyn was resolved to give his life away for the advance of the gospel.

But it wasn't an easy decision. As his biographer tells us, Henry Martyn had many reasons to stay put in England.

No one could exceed him in love for his country, or in affection for his friends; and few could surpass him in an exquisite relish for the various and refined enjoyments of a social and literary life. How then could it fail of being a moment of extreme anguish when he came to the deliberate resolution of leaving for ever all he held dear upon earth? But he was fully satisfied that the glory of that Savior who loved him, and gave Himself for him, would be promoted by his going forth to preach to the heathen.¹

Martyn himself often wrote in his journal of his internal struggle with what he was leaving behind, and with the hardships he must endure for the sake of the gospel. On one occasion, he similarly laments: "I had distressing thoughts about the little prospect of happiness in my future life." And at a particularly low point, he says this: "But now, in seasons of unbelief, nothing seems to lie before but one vast uninteresting wilderness, and heaven appearing but dimly at the end. Oh, how does this show the necessity of living by faith!"²

And yet Henry Martyn understood the secret to fighting the fight of faith: to lay hold of the God of glory, and find satisfaction in the glory of Christ. Thus, Martyn prayed: "Stir up my soul to lay hold of Thee, and remove from me the cloud of ignorance and sin that hides from me the glory of Jehovah; the excellency of my God."³

Seeing the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ

Ignorance and sin are the enemies of faith. They blind us to the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. However, encountering the God of glory, seeing the glory of God, this is what creates faith in your life and mine.

But where do we see the glory of God?

In the opening chapter of John's gospel, we're told that the God of glory appeared in flesh and blood, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Through what Jesus did and what he said, we see the glory of God. His miracles, for example, reveal his glory, which in turn is intended to bring about faith in the hearts of people. This is what happened at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. There Jesus famously turns water into

¹ John Sargent, *The Life and Letters of Henry Martyn* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985 [1819]), p. 26.

² Ibid., p. 30.

³ Ibid., p. 31.

wine. But what's important isn't so much the miracle in itself, but what it reveals about Jesus and what it accomplishes in the lives of his disciples. Listen to John's summary of things: "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him" (2:11).

But more important than his miracles is his death and resurrection. Knowing that his days were numbered and the end was drawing near, Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father: "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you" (John 17:1). Here, he refers to his own death on the cross, where the riches of God's glory will be so beautifully revealed in both judgment and mercy.

But Jesus then immediately goes on to pray: "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (17:5). Here, he shifts to anticipating his own resurrection from the dead, and his return to heaven and to his Father's right hand in glory.

Looking to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, this is the best way to elicit faith in your life and mine. For nowhere else do we come so close to the God of glory as we do standing at the foot of the cross, or at the entrance to the empty tomb.

After the crucifixion, Jesus' disciples band together and tried to make sense of what had happened. In Luke's telling of the story, Jesus suddenly appeared in the midst of their conversation, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you!"

Startled and doubting, the disciples needed the risen Jesus to show them his glorified body: his hands, his feet, how he has flesh and bones, how he can eat a piece of broiled fish. Then, Luke tells us, "he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures," at which point their fear gave way to faith, and their doubt was transformed into worship (Luke 24:36-53). Now, they'd not only seen Jesus of Nazareth, but encountered the risen Lord of glory. And faith was the result.

The Eyes of My Soul Opened

My friend Chris Castaldo, who's preached at Calvary before, didn't meet Christ until he was an adult. He grew up Catholic. A friend invited him to her evangelical church where Chris says, he heard a preacher with a style combining Al Pacino and Billy Graham, say, "Everyone on earth faces the same fundamental choice." Chris recounts what happened.

I don't know how to properly describe what came next. Anticipation surged through my veins, and my mind swirled with questions. *Then suddenly the eyes of my soul opened.* They immediately blinked, blinked again, and again, as though they'd been awoken from sleep by a flash of light. The object of my vision appeared so new and bright that my initial response was to retreat.

As my inner eyes tried to adjust, I sensed an imposing presence. I didn't see the angelic host or hear them singing. Instead I felt divine mercy and grace closing in on me. After a moment, it reached out to grasp my guilt and shame—previously reasons for hopelessness—and it brought to mind three simple words: "It is finished."

In that moment, I finally understood the meaning of Jesus' cross and resurrection. My search for hope had ended. The Lamb of God had died in my place, not simply as an offering for "sin" in a general sense but for me personally....

The joy of redemption became a reality. At once I identified with the penitent thief on the cross who encountered the Lord's promise, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43), the adopted orphan-turned-son (John 1:12-13), and the rescued rebel delivered from the domain of darkness (Col. 1:13). . . .

Like converts such as Augustine, Pascal, Luther, Newton, and a host of others throughout history, I encountered God in such a profound way that my life was permanently changed.⁴

Recognizing Jesus in the Breaking of Bread

The cross and resurrection of Jesus; the grace and mercy of a loving God; the eyes of your soul opened to an imposing presence; the joy of redemption; an encounter with God that's so profound your life is changed permanently—this is how faith happens.

You cannot create faith. It's not something self-generated. No, faith is a gift of God. It's something God gives you by revealing himself to you. Faith comes as a sovereign act of creation in your soul when God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," at the dawn of creation, in that same way shines in your heart, "to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

But you can go to the place where you will meet Jesus Christ, and there encounter his glory—the glory that creates faith in your soul.

Shortly after his death and resurrection, Jesus visited two travelers on the road to Emmaus. Jesus walked shoulder to shoulder with these two men, yet they didn't know it was him. Luke tells us: "But their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (24:16).

Only when Jesus sat at table with them, blessed and broke bread to share with them, did, Luke tells us, they even realize who they were with. "And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (v. 31).

This whole fascinating episode ends with Luke making this comment: "Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he [Jesus] was known to them in the breaking of the bread" (v. 35).

We come to know Jesus in the breaking of the bread. For there we see the God of glory in the person of the crucified and risen Christ.

Faith begins when we see the glory of God. The glory of God creates faith. God's presence in our lives gives rise to faith in our souls. Apart from seeing the glory of God, we will never come to faith. The glory of God creates faith.

⁴ Chris Castaldo, "A Journey to Evangelicalism," in *Journey of Faith*, ed. Robert L. Plummer (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), p. 143.

The Apostle Peter describes it in the opening verses of his second epistle or letter, by saying that God calls us “to [or by] his own glory and excellence” (1:3).

This is how God called Abraham to himself and out of Ur of the Chaldeans: by his own glory and excellence. And this is how God continues to call people to himself today.

Amen.

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