



For those of you who missed week one of The Story, let me review real quick. Chapters 1–11 of Genesis are considered to be the introduction to the book of Genesis. Genesis and the first five books of the Bible were written to a tired and discouraged people. The nation of Israel has been wandering for 40 years in the Sinai desert, on the verge of the Promised Land, ready to take it with Joshua. Two weeks ago we looked at the creation of the universe, Adam and Eve's fall into sin, and God's story of redemption through Noah. The big idea of my sermon was, "The Creator God redeems regardless of rebellion." Another way to put it is, "Regardless of anything we have done, God still wants to be with us."

Sadly, wiping out every person on earth and starting over with the most righteous man did not work. Genesis 11 ends with the Lord confusing the languages of the people building the tower of Babel and them being scattered over all the earth. Chapter 12 starts with the Lord breaking 300 years of silence and speaking to a man named Abram.

Today we are going to reflect on the life of Abraham. His story is told in Genesis 12–25. Let me give us a 30,000 foot view because I won't be able to cover every detail. These 14 chapters feature the formation of one family from which God creates a new people, places them in a new land, and invites them to bless all humanity. Genesis 12 starts with the Lord interrupting time and space by speaking to Abram who would later be named Abraham. The Lord tells Abraham to leave his country, his people, and his father's house to go to a land God would show him. Abraham leaves everything and goes.

Abraham also had a spouse, Sarai, who would later be named Sarah. She was unable to have children and proposes her own way to start the new nation (Gen. 16). Sarah offers Hagar, her maidservant, to Abraham and Ishmael is born. God blesses Ishmael, but does not begin the new nation with him. Abraham and Sarah, at 100 and 90 years old respectively, are promised their own child. Sarah laughs at this ridiculous "word of the LORD." Supernaturally, a boy is born to them and they name him Isaac, which means "laughter" (Gen. 18). God severely tests Abraham by telling him to offer his only son, Isaac, a teenager, as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah. In Genesis 22, Abraham obediently responds believing that God could raise his beloved son to life from the dead (Hebrews 11:7). Abraham passes the test of faith

and his son is spared. Soon after Abraham dies at the ripe old age of 175.

For today, I want us to spend the majority of our time in Genesis 12:1–9. In these opening verses God answers for us several very important questions about the unfolding of God's plan. The Bible is God's Big Story about his relentless pursuit of his children. From the very beginning to the end, God is always at work working out his great rescue plan. And his story isn't over. It includes us. Chapter 12 begins to answer the question, Who gets to be in God's story? Noah was an obvious pick. He was a righteous man who walked with God. But Abraham was not. So, what does God's choice of Abraham show us about God? Has God ever asked you to do something that didn't make sense? How does God call and use people today? Those are a few questions we'll consider.

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).

God Calls Abram

At the outset of chapter 12, we don't know much about Abram (Abraham). Abraham's father was Terah and their family lived in Ur of the Chaldeans and later Haran. Both were cities in ancient Babylonia, which today is modern day Iraq. Both Ur and Haran were important centers of worship for the moon god cult. It is very possible, probably certain, that Abraham and his family worshipped the moon god (Joshua 24:2–3).

Abraham also had a spouse, Sarah, who was barren and could not have children. When God initially spoke to Abraham he was 75 years old and Sarah was 65. Now, last time I checked those are not prime years to start a family! Suddenly, after 300 years of silence, the Lord speaks to Abraham and tells him to leave his country, his people, and his father's house to a land that God would show him. Now before you say, "Wow, how exciting and

adventurous!", you have to understand what God was asking him to do. Abraham would have to leave his country, the only place he's every known, his people, which was his identity, and his father's house, those he loved and cared for. Abraham would have to leave all that was familiar to him and set out for a place he's never been. This meant leaving the financial and physical security he had grown accustomed to. Abraham was a very wealthy man, living in a modern city. He would also be giving up his inheritance and right to the family land. His family, traditions, and his old ways of worship would all be left behind. Land, family and inheritance were three of the most important elements in ancient societies. What God wanted Abraham to do was risky, costly, and dangerous. Abraham was placing his family's survival, their identity and their future in the hands of the Lord.

If Abraham obeys, if he trusts God, then the Lord promises to incredibly bless him. Did you notice how many times God says, "I will" in this passage? This text, like the rest of the Bible, is more about what God does for Abraham and his people than what Abraham does for God. God makes seven promises to Abraham. "I will make you into a great nation." A nation includes a people with political control of its own affairs and destiny. "I will bless you." The word for bless means to make fertile and victorious. Abraham lived a long, full, and rich life. "I will make your name great." In the ancient world names were very important and reflected a person's character. Today, Abraham's name is renown. Among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, all three major world religions honor Abraham as a founder of their faith. God says, "I will bless those who bless you" and "whoever curses you I will curse." God promises to bless those who bless Abraham and curse those who curse him. These promises build up to a climactic "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." God promises Abraham will be a blessing to all nations. Abraham would be blessed so the Jewish nation could pass on that blessing to others. Through the seed of Abraham the whole world would be blessed.

When we talk about Israel as God's chosen people we need to understand the purpose of that. God chose Israel not just to bless them, not as the end game, but so through them the whole world would be blessed. From the very start, Israel had a missionary purpose. Ultimately, this promise would be fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus was one of Abraham's descendants. Through Jesus the blessing of salvation would be available to everyone. Paul could even say to the Galatians, *"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise"* (Galatians 3:28-29).

Those are some incredible promises, but how will Abraham respond?

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. 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.

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.

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 (verses 4–9).

Abram Obeys in Faith

I wonder how long it took Abraham to actually leave his home? Did he pack up that night? Did he wait a few weeks or months? We don't know. The text just says he left. It's also interesting that Abraham never speaks in this passage. Did he ever ask, "Why me God?" or "Are you sure you have the right guy?" We don't know. What's always amazed me was his age, Abraham was 75 years old and Sarah was 65. They must have wondered how God would use them to accomplish his plan. Not only were they old, but Sarah couldn't have children. In the ancient world this was a tragic situation to be in. How would God create a great nation through a barren woman? How would they survive the dangerous 400 mile journey?

I've learned if our plans make sense to us, they are often not God's! God's plan doesn't make any sense, but it doesn't seem to matter. Abraham leaves. Obeying God's word is never easy, is it? If it were easy, we'd all be much better at it! We sometimes believe if we obey God then things should all work out and go smoothly. The life of Abraham shows us that is seldom the case. Abraham's obedience soon meets trouble. Verse 6 says, *"the Canaanites were in the land."* Why is that there? To remind us that the Promised Land, where God told Abraham to go, was already occupied by another nation. These people were not just going to freely give their land to Abraham! "Oh, God spoke to you? Well that's nice, but we have several gods who tell us this is our land!"

And that wasn't the only obstacle in Abraham's way. Lot, his nephew, gets into trouble in Sodom and Gomorrah. Not only that, but Abraham and Sarah would have to wait 10 years to finally get pregnant. Faith is often an exercise in patience. Faith often gets tested. Obedience is costly. That's why I think the Lord appears to Abraham a second time to reassure him. He says in

verse 7, *"To your offspring I will give his land."* Despite your circumstance, doubts, and obstacles, I **will** give you this land. That is my promise. Remember, Abraham was not told Canaan was the land God was leading him to until he got there. Isn't that crazy? Faith usually borders on the crazy. God said, just obey me, walk in faith, take it one day at a time, and when you get there, I'll let you know! If everything made sense and works out problem-free, we don't need faith; we don't need to trust God.

Abraham obeyed God. His faith was demonstrated by obedience. Not only does he go to Canaan, but he builds an altar to the Lord and worships. By building an altar he's saying, "This is my God," and not only that, he was saying, "This is his land. I'm staking it out for him." This was an act of faith. Faith is demonstrated by obedience. When Jesus said to his first disciples, "Follow me," that demanded obedience without which their faith would have been useless. And faith is hard because so often it doesn't make any sense on a human level. Martin Luther King said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

Some of you are being called right now to take a step of faith. I don't think God ever works in significant ways apart from this. One of the greatest ministry experiences I ever had came after I obeyed a call from God most people around me thought was foolish. I was a senior in college, preparing to graduate from business school with about 10 job offers on the table. In the midst of all that, I was asked by my youth pastor to move with him to Las Vegas to start a new church. Many of you know this story. It didn't make any sense for me to move to Las Vegas. But, through a series of events, I sensed God's call and moved. And guess what? God incredibly blessed me with a wonderful ministry and my incredible wife. Then God did it again. I could have stayed and lived a very comfortable life in Las Vegas with a thriving ministry and huge house with a pool. But God said go to back to the least church, most expensive, insane places to live in all the world. God is still calling us today to take risky steps of faith. In a way, he tells us all to "go" just as he told Abraham. Jesus said, *"Go and make disciples of all nations..."* (Matthew 28:19). This doesn't mean we're all called to leave our homes, but we're all part of God's plan to reach the nations.

There are probably tons more lessons we could learn from Abraham's life but I'd like to focus on just two more applications from his life of faith. The first is, God can call anybody. To an old, childless, idol-worshipping couple in the wrong location, God speaks to them and invites them on a journey of faith. So often, we count out the very people God is excited to use. Often times that's ourselves. Like me, maybe you did not grow up in a Christian home. For years I didn't believe God could ever use me. God's choice of Abraham offers you hope today that there's a spot for you in The Story too. Maybe you feel like you've blown it; I've been there too! You've worshipped lots of counterfeit

gods like sex, money, and power in your life. You've thought, "Why would God want anything to do with me?" God's choice to call Abraham offers you hope that there's space for former idol worshippers. Maybe you feel like your time has past, that your best days are behind you. You think that you don't have the energy to keep up with all these young people today. You still use a flip phone! God's decision to call Abraham and Sarah and use them in his Story offers you hope today that he's not done with you. If you are still alive, God's not done with you.

You might be thinking, "Yeah, but Rob, come on. Abraham was a one time exception." But you'd be wrong. Consider a few examples from the rest of the Story. Abraham and Sarah were old. Isaac was insecure. Leah was unattractive. Joseph was a refugee slave. Moses was a murderer who stuttered. Gideon was fearful. Samson was arrogant. Rahab was a prostitute. David had an affair and then killed a man trying to cover his tracks. Elijah was suicidal. Jeremiah struggled with depression. Jonah was a prejudicial racist. Mary was a poor teenage girl. John the Baptist was a bug eater. Peter was impulsive. Martha worried a lot. The Samaritan woman had several failed marriages. Thomas was a skeptic. Paul had poor health. And Timothy was timid.

So, what's your excuse? What reason have you been telling yourself why God can't call and use you? God can call **anybody**. For some of you that call is where you work. Recently I heard the CEO of VMWare say he is not the CEO, but the CSO, the Chief Spiritual Officer, and in his ministry are 17,000 employees. Maybe your call is to be a mother. I believe that is one of the most difficult callings to have. Maybe your calling is to work with teenagers. God has called us all to ministry here on the SF Peninsula. God is even bringing the nations to us!

The second lesson is, Faith is proven by obedience. Abraham was safe, secure and rich, so why leave all that? Because faith is not built in comfort and security. Faith is built under pressure. Faith is built by obeying God's Word when it doesn't make sense, when you don't know where you are going or how God is going to come through for you. True North for Abraham was to daily surrender his plans and obediently walk with the Lord. That meant taking one step of faith and one step of obedience every day. He didn't need all the answers to his questions. He didn't need to have it all figured out either. He wasn't shaken by his circumstances. He simply obeyed. A.W. Tozer says this, "The Bible recognizes no faith that does not lead to obedience, nor does it recognize any obedience that does not spring from faith. The two are at opposite sides of the same coin." Faith is lived out through obedience, and obedience is fueled by faith. God calls his people to live by faith through acts of obedience. Is there any area in your life where you are not being obedient to God? What are you going to do about that?

Hear me well, I'm not saying that you should try to muster more faith and act obediently because that's how to honor God. The truth is you will fail. I will fail. You won't always obey God all the time either. And thankfully God is not impressed with our outward performance anyway. The Good News is that there is someone who obeyed God perfectly his entire life. Jesus always did the right thing for the right reason. His obedience would lead to the cross, where he would die in your place and for your sins. So when God looks at you he sees Jesus' faith and his obedience, not yours. Once we embrace what God has done for us in Jesus, we are free to live by faith. Faith not based on a set of rules. Faith

not based on how well we do. We obey then, out of our love and gratefulness for Jesus and his work in us. Jesus said in John 14:15, "*If you love me, keep my commands.*" Love motivates us to obey. God loves obedience because it shows we trust him.

Your faith and my faith will experience ups and downs. We'll have times when we laugh and doubt and go off and try to get it done on our own, which always ends in a disaster. But here's the deal: When you're faithless, God remains faithful.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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