

We're all on what I'd call a journey of faith. That journey will involve many ups and downs, many starts and stops, many wins and many losses. Take Abraham, for example. God called him to leave his country and his people and go to a land he knew nothing about. It was about both promise and blessing. God promised him, *"I will make you into a great nation...I will make your name great..."* (12:2). And then God said, *"I will bless those who bless you... all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"* (12:3).

How did Abram respond? The Bible says, *"So Abram went, as the Lord told him"* (12:4a). He went with his wife, Sarai, his nephew, Lot, and other members of his household. Thus, Abram began his journey of faith.

But it wasn't long before this man of faith stumbled badly. After entering the promised land of Canaan, there was a famine, and so he packed his bags and went down to Egypt. He wasn't trusting God; he was taking matters into his own hands. He even pawned his wife Sarai off as his sister to save his own skin. Sarai was a very attractive woman, and he feared Egypt's Pharaoh would kill him to take her as his own. But Pharaoh figured Abram's ruse out and sent him packing.

As Genesis 12 comes to an end, Abram leaves Egypt and returns to Canaan. From a spiritual point of view, his tail is between his legs. His faith failed. Where would he go now? How would he recover his life of faith? It's a question we might ask ourselves. After our own faith has failed, how do we recover? How do we return to faith?

My own faith journey began when I was just 17. I was flooded with a sense of God's presence and love. I had a deep desire to serve Him though I had no idea what that even meant. But, for most of the next year, which was my first year of college, I continued in much of the sinful behavior that characterized my prior life. My faith was fragile, and soon I was in a spiritual wasteland, doubting God and wondering if everything I'd experienced with Him was an illusion. How would I, how does anyone, return to faith?

Returning to faith begins with repentance and renewal

For Abraham, it began by returning to the same place he'd been before.

From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier and where

he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the Lord. (vv. 1-4)

Abram returns to Canaan, first to the Negev in the southern part of Canaan, and then to Bethel. This was a significant place for Abram. Bethel means "house of God." The narrator tells us this is where Abram had pitched his tent and built an altar of worship when he first entered Canaan.

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. 12:8

Abram returns to this same place and again builds an altar and calls on the name of the Lord. It must have been a wonderful thing for him to be back at the place that meant so much to him. While in Egypt, he built no altars. But now it's like he's home again. He's reconnecting with the God who called him. Bethel was a place of both repentance and renewal for Abram.

There are times in our faith journey when we need to return to Bethel. There are times when we've been sojourning down in Egypt, and we realize it was a huge waste of time, and we've grown distant from God. There are so many things that get us off track. Sometimes it's blatant sin, like much my first year of college; sometimes, it's just busyness and distraction. Days go by, and we realize we've lost our fellowship with God. So, what should we do? Go right back to where we started. We go back to the place where we got it right. We pitch our tent there and make it the house of God. We build an altar and call upon the name of the Lord. The altar is a place of repentance. It's a place where we confess that we've wandered off, and we receive his forgiveness and grace anew. If you've been wandering in Egypt, there's a way back. You can come back to Bethel and call upon the name of the Lord; he's more than willing to forgive and restore.

By the way, I finally did that in the Spring of my freshman year. I turned away from the stupid choices I'd been making and made a conscious decision to find some Christ-followers, and when I did, one of the first people I met was my future wife!

Notice also the writer tells us Abram had become very wealthy in Egypt. We know from chapter 12 that Pharaoh had stocked him with sheep, cattle, donkeys, servants, and camels. So Abram returned to Canaan with all this wealth. As we'll see in a moment, this will precipitate a new crisis for Abram. For many of us, adversity brings out the best in us, but prosperity can bring out the worst. In fact, whenever I marry a couple and we talk