

(Devotional #14) **Character Studies from Hebrews 11:1-40**  
**Heroes of the Faith: Abraham and the Divine Promises – Part 1**  
(Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-6, 18; 17:1-10; Hebrews 11:8-16)

**THE FIRST STEP OF FAITH – ABRAHAM**

*The LORD said to Abraham<sup>1</sup>, go forth from your country and from your relatives, and from your father's house, to the land which I will show to you; and **I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, and so, be a blessing! And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you, I will bind under a curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed** – **Genesis 12:1-3***

*By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place, which he was to receive for an inheritance, and he departed not knowing where he was going – **Hebrews 11:8***

*Abraham believed in YAHWEH, and righteousness was credited to him – **Genesis 15:6***

The first step of faith for Noah was the first swing of his ax to cut down a tree for lumber from which to build the ark. The first step of faith for Abraham was pointing his feet toward the west and taking a step into the unknown – it was a step that changed the world. In significance, it even eclipses Neal Armstrong's famous step onto the surface of the moon.

We live in the age of the GPS, so it is hard for us to imagine the faith it took for Abraham to set out on a journey to an unknown land with no directions. All he had was the Word of God saying, **"I'll let you know when you get there"**! His faith is highlighted even more when we realize who Abraham was and where he was born.

Abraham was living in Mesopotamia, and there are things about him that may not come to mind immediately when we think of the Father of the Jewish nation – but they are worth considering.

- **First, Abraham was a Gentile when he was called by God!** This comes as a surprise to my Jewish friends. If we use circumcision as an indicator of **'Jewishness'**, well – let's reflect on the sequence of events in Abraham's life: (1) Abraham was called by God in Genesis 12:1-3<sup>2</sup>, (2) the covenant God made with Abraham was ratified in Genesis 15<sup>3</sup> – but (3) he wasn't circumcised until Genesis 17<sup>4</sup>! So, when God saved Abraham, he was a Gentile! (*This should tell us something, namely, that **God always planned to offer salvation both to Jews and to Gentiles.***)
- **Second, God rarely picks people for special things from the crème de la crème of society.** Sometimes he does, but Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 to **"consider your calling,"** i.e., **"look in the mirror."** Then he goes on to say, **'God has not chosen the mighty, the noble, or the aristocrats'** – **No! He has (for the most part) chosen the base, the weak, and the foolish, because by doing this, the elect cannot boast in our own self-worth.** In the case of Abraham, he chose a man from an idolatrous household, where other gods were worshipped; in other words, the natural man, Abraham, was an idolater<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The central character around whom this lesson is built is Abram. Later, his name will be changed to Abraham (Genesis 17:5). For simplicity's sake, he will be referred to as 'Abraham' throughout this and future lessons.

<sup>2</sup> See also Acts 7:1-8

<sup>3</sup> The odd account in Genesis 15 of the splitting of the animals was a well-known ritual in the Ancient Near East that was part of a covenant ratification ceremony.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 17:10-14; 23-24; see also Romans 4:9-12

<sup>5</sup> See Joshua 24:1-2

God chose Abraham, an uncircumcised, idolatrous Gentile, to be the Father of His elect nation, whose descendants will be the writers and custodians of the Scriptures, from whom the kings of Israel will descend, and eventually through whom the Messiah will come into the world.

This is the man, who believed in Yahweh, and as a result of his faith, righteousness was imputed to him<sup>6</sup>.

Abraham's first step was an act of obedience grounded in faith. Stephen tells us in Acts 7:2, "**God appeared to Abraham while he was living in Mesopotamia.**" We do not know much about the events that led him to a point in his life when he became capable of '**believing in Yahweh.**' We do not even know how he knew about Yahweh. But God appeared to unbelieving Abraham ... and this pagan, idolatrous sinner came to faith in exactly the same way Saul, a self-righteous, legalistic sinner, came to faith, when Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road.

When God called Abraham, he was not a man with a B.A. from the University of Mesopotamia, destined for a great job somewhere out west. He was middle-aged, married, with a lifetime of accumulated possessions. He was doing well living in the wealthy metropolis of Ur. But it was in the midst of this comfortable existence that God called Abraham to leave all that he knew in order to go somewhere else – even to a place God would not show him until later. Can you imagine Abraham trying to explain this to Sarah?

God's call for Abraham to move from Mesopotamia to Canaan (*the Promised Land*) came after the effects of the Fall had become all too apparent. Genesis records only a portion of human history ... but it is enough for us to understand that a new way of dealing with the human race was at hand. Abraham's call came after (1) *the Fall and expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden*; it followed (2) *the murder of Abel by Cain*; it was preceded by (3) *the Angelic Incursion that led to the great flood*; and it was after (4) *the revolt of Nimrod and the incident at the Tower of Babel*. It was not until after the utter depravity of the human race had been fully demonstrated that God dealt with Abraham in an act of sovereign, electing grace. We know God's call was an act of sovereign, electing grace because we know who Abraham was before God saved him.

Remember the playground when you were a kid? Remember when you were the one, '*who got to pick.*' You always picked the best; you chose the kids you thought could help your team win. Your choices back then were made based on one thing: **MERIT**. God's grace does not work that way. Election does not work that way. **MERIT** has no place in Biblical election. Biblical election rests on one thing and one thing only – (*Paul explains it this way*): '*Election is according to GOD'S PURPOSE, according to HIS CHOICE, not because of merit, but because of Him who does the calling*' – **Romans 9:11**<sup>7</sup> (slightly paraphrased).

In Genesis 12:1-3<sup>8</sup>, Abraham is called **AWAY FROM** everything that was familiar to him, and **TO** a distant land, where everything was foreign. I do not think we give enough credence to how big a commitment this was for Abraham.

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<sup>6</sup> See Genesis 15:6 and 2 Corinthians 5:21

<sup>7</sup> See Romans 9:1–11:36 for Paul's full treatment of this doctrine.

<sup>8</sup> In Acts 7:2, Stephen mentions that Abraham was called while living in Mesopotamia. We know the city in which he lived was Ur (Genesis 11:31; 15:7). There was a trade route that led from Ur to Haran in Syria. It was a well-traveled road and apparently when Abraham left Ur, he and his family traveled that road and stayed for about twenty-five years in Haran. God's call recorded in Genesis 12:1-3 apparently was a second call, designed to motivate Abraham to leave Haran and continue his journey into Canaan – the first call having occurred years before in Ur – (see Genesis 12:5).

One of the most traumatic events of my teenage years happened the day I found out my family was moving from Sherman, Texas to Oklahoma City. It was awful because I was leaving a school I loved and friends, whose company I enjoyed. I was moving to a city I did not know, and to a school where I had no acquaintances. But this was nothing compared to what God asked Abraham to do. After we moved, I was able to go back to see my friends. I could call them on the telephone if I wanted to, and I could write and receive letters.

In the age in which Abraham lived, when you moved away, you never saw, spoke to, or heard from your friends or family again. Today we would call this *'maximum social distancing.'* But then it was more like *'a social and geographical death'* than it was a mere move to a neighboring state. But this is what God asked Abraham to do. So, there was a price to pay – *(the loss of what was familiar)* – but there were promises that far outweighed the loss.

The promises were based on God's Word and they all had to do with the future. There is an oft-repeated phrase in Genesis Chapters 12–25: *"And the Word of the LORD came to Abraham..."* This phrase always is followed by Abraham's response and the subsequent results of his actions. When Abraham heard God's Word and obeyed, God blessed him ... but when he heard it but did not obey, he and Sarah always got into trouble.

There is a Biblical principle that always is true: *'When God's people listen to his Word and act on it in obedient faith, God blesses them.'* This is a simple principle on which we can rely.

God's promises are encapsulated in what will come to be known as the Abrahamic Covenant<sup>9</sup>. Though details will be added over time, there are three major elements to the Abrahamic Covenant: (1) **LAND**, (2) **SEED** (*descendants to inhabit the Promised Land*), and (3) **BLESSING** (*both personal and national blessings*).

These promises were more valuable to Abraham than the things he was asked to leave back in Mesopotamia. Because Abraham was willing to stake his life and his future on the Word of God, his faith changed history. Rather than staying in the shelter and safety of what he knew, Abraham stepped out of his comfort zone in faith. We are sometimes asked to do the same thing.

When God promised to make Abraham *'a Great Nation,'* this was a national promise. It also was completely out of reach as far as he was concerned. Some of the other blessings might have seemed to be within reach, but *this 'nation thing,'* was not attainable by any human means. Let's consider some of the promises God made to Abraham:

- **WEALTH** – I have known rich people and poor people. Many of the wealthy believe their affluence comes from their own brilliance, when in fact, wealth is a gift from God. Abraham could have thought his material blessings were the result of his own industrious mind and hard work ... and he would not be the first or the last person to think this.
- **FAME** – Fame can be even more deceptive than wealth. Turn on your TV and see what fame can do to people. No one is immune. It is almost universally true that the very famous believe they deserve the accolades they receive. There even are people today, who are famous for being famous! They will be forgotten in a heartbeat! But think of the number of people throughout the ages, who have known Abraham's name. Abraham

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<sup>9</sup> The Abrahamic Covenant is developed in Scripture over time. Here are some of the more significant passages pertaining to this covenant: Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-27; 35:10-12; Joshua 1:2-6; 21:43-45; 1 Chronicles 16:15-18; Isaiah 49:6; Jeremiah 25:9-12; Ezekiel 37:21-25; Daniel 9:2; Romans 11:1-32.

could have deluded himself into believing he was responsible for his wealth and his fame; but he wasn't deluded because he knew the source of all good things is God alone.

Great nations begin with the birth of a child. But Abraham always had '*a name problem.*' His birth name, '*Abram,*' means '*Exalted Father,*' yet he had to go through most of his life as *the 'exalted father, who has no children.'* When God renamed him '*Abraham,*' it made matters worse, for *Abraham* means, '*Father of a Multitude*'! But maybe even worse, Abraham built his life around God's promise of a particular son, yet *the 'father of a multitude'* was childless.

We are familiar with Sarah's scheme to give her Egyptian maid, Hagar, to Abraham, so she could bear a son to him on behalf of Sarah. Time does not allow delving into that situation, so suffice it to say, it was a disastrous decision. What God had in mind for Abraham was *a particular son.* Genesis 21:12 says: "***Do not be distressed ... for through Isaac your descendants shall be called.***" This reflects back to Genesis 17:21: "***But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this time next year.***" This means, God had a particular son in mind, and that son will be born to Abraham by Sarah, not by Hagar.

Hebrews 11:9-10 continue Abraham's story:

*By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign (land), dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise, for he was looking for a city, which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God – Hebrews 11:9-10*

Even though Abraham believed God's promise, he had no visible possession in the promised land. Year after year, the old Patriarch pitched his tent, living among the Canaanite tribes. He owned not one square foot of the ground he was promised until he purchased a field from Ephron the Hittite, the field of Machpelah, for a burial site for Sarah.

What was the secret of Abraham's faith in spite of the lack of tangible evidence the promises would be fulfilled – ever? *Is this not what the author of Hebrews had in mind when he wrote: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"<sup>10</sup>?*

Abraham maintained his faith by not obsessing about what he did not have, but by looking at what was sure to come.<sup>11</sup> He looked for a heavenly city, not a city made of brick and mortar. His hope – and thus his faith – was in something better than what a man could design or build. His eyes were on the Master Architect, who had called the universe into existence by the Word of his mouth.

The magnitude of Abraham's faith is revealed when we recall again '*where he was from,*' and '*what he knew.*' Against all odds, Abraham believed God ... and he acted accordingly. Abraham lived by faith!

So, let's recap – Abraham is told to leave his homeland for a distant land God will show him, and he is to do this based on nothing more than faith in the Word of God (*the promises*). Then, when he finally arrives in Canaan, God allows him to wait there for twenty-five years, childless. And during that time, Abram is renamed Abraham ('*Father of a Multitude*') and is expected by God to continue to walk by faith, even though every day that passed made the likelihood of having a son by Sarah (*humanly speaking*) impossible. [***AND WE THINK WE HAVE PROBLEMS!***] Abraham was not a perfect man – he had flaws like we all do. But he became the model of Habakkuk's exhortation, "***The Justified shall live by faith***" – ***Habakkuk 2:4.***

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<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 11:1

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Hebrews 11:13-16; 12:22-24; 13:13-14; Revelation 21:14.