

“A Faith That Responds”
Sermon Series on *The Hall of Faith*
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(Gen. 12:1-9)

Introduction.

How do you make the big decisions in your life – where to go to school, who to marry, what job to take? What are the processes you utilize to help you figure out what you’re supposed to do and discern which way to go? Some people take out a legal pad and write down the pros and cons of the options in two different columns and then weigh them against each other. Others seek the advice of people they trust. But I would suggest that in addition to these helpful tools in decision-making, wise is the person who learns how to listen for the voice of God and discern His call to help you decide what you should do.

Jesus once said, *“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep, and my sheep know me.... My sheep hear my voice; I know them and they follow me” (Jn. 10:14,27)*. Have you learned to hear the voice of Jesus when He calls you, and do you make it your goal in life to follow where God leads? How do you bring God into making the decisions of your life?

This morning we’re going to study the life of a man named Abraham in the OT, and we’ll learn how he heard God call him and responded in faith. We’ll also discover that God is in the business of calling people, and there is always a blessing in store whenever we respond to His call.

I. The Call of God to Go.

Scripture tells us that the OT patriarch Abraham, who was called Abram at this time in his life, was born and raised in the city of Ur which is located near the coast of the Persian Gulf in what is today modern Iraq. While it’s not clear in this passage in Genesis, Acts 7:2 tells us that it was while Abraham lived in Ur that he first heard the call of God. Sometime after this, Abraham’s father Terah took Abraham along with Abraham’s wife Sarah and Terah’s grandson Lot, and they all traveled as far as the city of Harran, which is in modern day Turkey. But then Terah died, leaving Abraham as the guardian of his nephew. And apparently it was in Harran that God reissued His call to Abraham which is recorded in this passage.

There are several things I want you to notice about the call of Abraham. *First, it was a call to go.* Out of the blue God said to Abraham, “Go to the land I will show you.” But where was this land to which Abraham was supposed to go? How would he know when he got there? Was there a map God wanted him to follow? The Lord didn’t answer any of these questions, and the only detail that is given is, “Go to the land I will show you.” That’s a little vague, don’t you think? If I was Abraham I’d want a little more specificity before I ventured out.

Consider what it meant for Abraham to respond to the call to go. He had to leave behind his extended family, the comforts of home, and the culture in which he had been raised. And,

as it became clear during his journey, Abraham also had to leave behind the practice of idolatry and the pagan culture of his past.

Up until this point in his life, Abraham was a worshiper of idols. In fact, his father manufactured them, and making idols was the family business. But when the Lord appeared to Abraham, essentially He said, "I'm the only true God of the universe, and I want you to follow Me alone. No more worshipping the idols of your ancestors, or the idols that your father has been making. I want you to make a break with that past, and I've got a new future for you."

The city of Ur where Abraham was raised was a center for astrology in the ancient world, and in particular it was known for the worship of the moon and the stars. God wanted the Abraham to make a break with all that. However, this proved not to be all that easy, and we see in Scripture how this problem continued to affect Abraham's family all the way down to the third generation (see Gen. 31:30-34).

Abraham came to a moment of decision. Would he continue to stay where he was, living his life as he normally did, worshipping the idols that had been part of his family? Or was he going to follow Yahweh, the one true God of the universe, and walk with Him? The call to go involved a journey that was not only physical but also spiritual. There was a fork in the road, and Abraham couldn't go both ways because they led in different directions. He had to choose.

The same invitation is given to you today. Will you stay where you are, or are you open to respond to God's call to go? Now, I'm not talking about violating the governor's order to shelter in place. I'm referring to your life after this pandemic dies down. When this is all over the Lord may call you to stay right where you are, or He may call you to go to a new place both physically and spiritually. The key question is, "Are you willing, and are you ready to go? Are you prepared to separate yourself from where you've been in the past and respond to His call to go in a new direction?" The decision is up to you.

II. The Call of God to Trust.

In Genesis 12 we read, "*The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you...So Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran'*" (Gen. 12:1,4).

In order to respond to God's call on his life, Abraham had to step out in faith and trust the Lord. He had to believe God and take Him at His Word. And he didn't just believe in some abstract sense. Rather, he responded in a tangible way with obedience. Abraham altered his life, and he literally walked in a new direction.

James Montgomery Boice says¹ that in some ways faith is the *most natural thing we can do*. Faith is natural because everyone exercises some kind of faith every single day. In fact, it is impossible to live a normal life without exercising faith. For example, when you order something from Amazon, you have faith that they're going to take your money and send you the item you ordered and deliver it on the day they said they would. And when you're driving your car down 421 at 45 mph (well, some of you drive 45 mph on 421!), you are exercising a great deal of faith that people will stay in their lanes and not swerve over into yours.

The point is faith is a natural human experience, and you can't do life without it. However, Boice also says that faith in the biblical sense is also one of *the most unnatural things we can do*. When we talk about putting our faith in God and not merely in people, we're talking about

faith in One whose nature and ways are beyond our full comprehension. As a result, there are times when God calls us to do something, and it seems completely contrary to our reason or experience.

Think about how counterintuitive Abraham had to be in responding to God's call to trust. The Lord told the patriarch that he was going to have descendants who God would build into a great nation. But Abraham was 75-years-old, and his wife Sarah was past child-bearing years. How was this going to be possible?! God also told Abraham that He was going to give the patriarch's descendants the Promised Land, but Abraham didn't even know where he was supposed to go at the time. Abraham had to trust that God was able to do what He said He would do – give him heirs and give them a land.

Whenever God interrupts a person's life and extends a call to them, it never means that life is going to be easy. God never gives people easy jobs, and He asks us to trust. He never says, "Hey, I have an assignment for you, but it won't take much time, it won't be very difficult, and it won't change your life very much." There are no stories in the Bible like that. Whenever God calls a person, the most He promises is, *"I will be with you."*

Whenever you step out in faith and trust God, there is no guarantee that life is going to be easy. And the reason for this is because God is more concerned about your character and the person you become than He is about the outward circumstances of your life. And that includes this pandemic of Covid-19 we're dealing with. God will use anything and everything to shape your character into the image of His Son our Savior Jesus Christ, and His primary goal is not for your comfort or your pleasure. His primary goal is that you grow into the person He created you to be, a person who loves and trusts Him no matter what.

How is God using Covid-19 to speak to you right now? Do you think God might be using this pandemic to try to get your attention and do something in your life? I read an article last week Mike Horne shared with me, and it talked about how Covid-19 was revealing some of the idols in ministry we pastors tend to have. For example, pastors like to preach to a full house in worship. Well, that's not happening right now! Another example is that most pastors like to stay busy and draw a lot of their affirmation in their job from being with people. But social distancing restrictions have eliminated most of that. We can't visit people in the hospitals, and there isn't anyone with whom to shake hands after a service. About the most I get from the tech crew after the service is a toe-tap!

What is God saying to you in this pandemic? What idol in your life is He revealing during this time? Does it relate to the safety of your family, or your children's education, or what you do for a living? I think if you listen for God's voice, He wants to tell you some things about your life and the need to trust Him more.

III. The Call of God to Bless.

In His promise to Abraham, God said, *"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.... And all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you"* (Gen. 12:2,3).

The first time we see the word "bless" in the Bible, it doesn't involve human beings at all. It's back in Genesis 1, and there we're told that God created all the creatures of the sea and every living thing which teem in the water, and *He blessed them* and said, *"Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas"* (Gen. 1:21,22). Then God made human

beings, and He also blessed them and gave them the same command. What we see here is that part of the mission of God, the *missio Dei*, is to bless.

However, what is added here in Genesis 12 in the call of Abraham is a new twist to that whole idea in that not only is it the mission of God to bless, but now it is also the mission of humanity to do so. In other words, *we are blessed to be a blessing*. This was hinted at in Genesis 1 when God gave our first parents what theologians call the *cultural mandate*. The original job description of Adam and Eve included the charge to exercise dominion over the world, but to do so as stewards in a responsible manner. In other words, humanity was blessed in order to be a blessing from the very beginning. And here in Genesis 12, what is implied in the first chapter of Genesis is now spelled out in detail in the call to Abraham. God specifically says, *"I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you...so that all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*

This means that at the end of the day, it's really not about you. As Rick Warren says in his book *The Purpose Driven Life*,² the purpose of your life is far greater than your personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why God put you on this planet, it was because He wanted to bless you so you could be a blessing to others.

Let me give you an example of what this looks like in real life. Over the weekend I read the story of a woman who understands that she is blessed to be a blessing. Her name is Gretchen, and she's a physician who lives in Rochester, NY. Gretchen realizes that she's been given so much in life, and she wants to give back and pay it forward. So a couple of years ago she went to Guatemala on a short-term trip to use her medical training to help the poor. But last month she sensed she was called to volunteer for a week at a public hospital in Brooklyn to see if she could be of any help.

The experience changed her life. During her time there she said that she served as a doctor, a nurse, a social worker, a friend, and a substitute family member. She realizes that her gift of five days was a drop in the bucket compared to her colleagues who are permanently stationed in Brooklyn. But she says the experience she had there was transformative.

One patient she had was a 76-year-old woman who had pulmonary fibrosis and eyes that sparkled. (We'll call her Peggy.) Peggy had a lot to say as she huffed and puffed under the oxygen mask attached to her face, and she said the kinds of things other patients were too scared or too tired to admit. "Please don't leave me," and, "I'm afraid."

Gretchen learned that Peggy had been trained as an opera singer, so Gretchen asked if Peggy would sing to her. With 10 liters of oxygen blasting in her face, Peggy sang to Gretchen in French. Her wispy voice was unexpectedly beautiful. Gretchen turned her oxygen down a little and they cheered together at the progress she was making.

However, it didn't last, and a few hours later Peggy took a turn for the worse. The weapons of modern medicine weren't enough to vanquish this awful virus in Peggy's lungs, the same lungs that had been able to sing to Gretchen in French just a few hours before. They Face Timed with Peggy's family, and a little while later she passed away. Gretchen's heart was heavy. It's the price you pay when you love someone well.

Gretchen writes, "I will never forget Peggy – her sparkling eyes and beautiful voice, and her strong hands that squeezed mine back."³ Gretchen was blessed to be a blessing, and it blessed her right back again.

Conclusion.

It takes courage to follow the call of God, and sometimes it breaks your heart. But there is always a blessing whenever we respond to God's call. It is never for nothing.

How is God calling you to step out in faith and trust Him today in the middle of this pandemic? What do you need to do to overcome your reluctance to take that first step in response to the call of God? How do you need to break with your past and follow the Lord in a new way which you know is more honoring to Him? And in what ways does God want you to be a blessing to someone else in the coming week? You may not be a medical person, but there are other ways you can bless people during this time of crisis.

Abraham couldn't have imagined all that would happen in his life or to his physical and spiritual descendants who would come after him and carry on down to this very day 4,000 years later. You and I are still talking about him today. It represents the commitment of a faithful God who calls people, but it requires us to respond in faith. Listen for the voice of God today. He is calling you.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis, Vol. 2*, pp. 458-459.

² Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, p. 17.

³ Gretchen Volk, "She was blessed with a song from a patient who fell victim to Covid-19," *The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, April 24, 2020.