

# Fear or Faith?

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] no best westerns or you know novatels along the way like we do now. There was no international rule of law either. So you were exposed to bandits, to tyrant kings and rulers. And what we find today is Abraham making not just one journey but two. One he makes in faith but the other he does out of fear and both have lessons to teach us as we make our own journeys in life. So let's start with the first journey, the one made in faith. It all started verse 1 of chapter 12 when the Lord had said to Abraham, leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. Now recall that I had said that Abraham heard his call in Ur and though he had begun his journey, they had stopped in Haran where Abraham's father, Terah, died. So I've got a map of it up on the screen. They didn't go due west because that's just desert but they went northwest. They followed the Fertile Crescent, the ancient trade route. Now that initial decision to leave Ur in the first place was an act of faith because he's called to leave his country, his people and his father's household. And so this is a big step into the unknown because what Abraham leaves behind is the comfort of his homeland, his existing networks, his social standing, all the familiarity he had with his home culture. And he was setting out to what could potentially be a hostile place. The destination was unknown to him and there were no concrete details as to where that might be. Not even rough not even a rough plan from God. All he has is the promise of God. And a God he's only just come to know by the way. It's what one scholar calls he's got only the bare word of God. Or John Calvin, a bit more colorful, the naked word of God. But it's an amazing word, full of promise, with great hope of blessing. So read with me again in verse 2 and 3. God promises to make him into a great nation.

He will make his name great and he will be a blessing to others. Those who bless him will be blessed and those who curse him will be cursed. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through him.

Have a quick count of the word bless or blessing in those two verses. If I'm not wrong, I think there are five times that God uses it. And for Abraham to trust that promise was even bigger than what we think because we need to consider that Sarai was barren. It's said so in chapter 11 and verse 30.

Abraham believed in spite of what his own experience was telling him. Further, the Lord promised to make him a great nation, but then he calls him out of his homeland, so denying him any home advantage he had.

But if you can remember the last time, I said that's because God wanted Abraham to learn that this promise is going to come entirely from God's hand and nothing through human effort.

[ 3 : 2 5 ] Abraham had to start afresh and trust in God alone. And trust God, Abraham did, for we see in verse 4, Abraham left as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abraham was 75 years old when he set out from Haran.

And Terah, his father we know, had just died. And so Abraham took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions he had accumulated, and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

And so in the map, which was just up, they journey south into what is modern-day Israel. Now, as we read the story, we see that leaving Ur wasn't Abraham's only act of faith.

There's actually a phrase in verse 5 where it says that Abraham took the people that he had acquired in Haran. Now, I think these aren't slaves or servants because elsewhere, probably in the next story we'll see, if that's what they were, that's what the Bible would refer to them as.

Rather, these people were actually the ones that Abraham had won over, converted to his cause, as it were, convinced them to follow him.

[ 4 : 41 ] So for that to happen, Abraham must have been telling them about his promise. Abraham was busy proclaiming the promise to others, and that really is an act of faith, isn't it?

Because he was open to ridicule this rather outlandish promise. Imagine going around telling people that you are the agent of God's blessing. Bless me, he tells them, and God will bless you.

Imagine if I said that. And God will bless the whole earth through me. And by the way, he says, I'm going to be a great nation too. And then right beside him, he has what is clearly a barren wife.

But we see that Abraham actually continues in this vein, even as he enters the land of Canaan. For in verse 7, he builds an altar to the Lord, and then in verse 8, he does it again. And this time, he also calls on the name of the Lord.

Now, the first altar was built at the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. And the Bible says that the Canaanites were in the land at the time. Now, the great tree, you know, anyone's guess, but probably some sort of oak, maybe a big oak.

[ 5 : 50 ] But it wasn't just any big old tree, right? Rather, it was a significant landmark. Moreh actually means teacher or oracle giver. And so this was actually a place of worship for the Canaanites.

Shechem was in the center of the country. And the Canaanites would have gathered there to hear the oracle givers, the soothsayers, pronounce their sayings or their oracles by deciphering the words of the gods.

How did they do that? By the rustling of the leaves of the trees. And so it would not have gone unnoticed for Abraham to worship the Lord there. And God did not speak with rustling leaves, but with words.

And so here at Moreh, God finally gives him something concrete to hold on to. He says to your offspring, I will give you this land. In fact, the Bible even says that the Lord appeared to him.

So it seems to suggest that it was a theophany. And so when Abraham builds an altar in response, he was actually laying claim to that promise. Symbolically claiming the land.

[ 7 : 00 ] And then showing everyone that it was really the Lord who owns the land they were in. Not the other gods that they worship. Similarly, when he goes further down to Bethel, he pitches his hand between Bethel and Ai.

And yet again, this is another center of pagan worship. Because the Canaanite god El, it's actually part of the city's name. So Bethel is house of El.

So this is where they would have worshipped as well, the Canaanites. And so once more, Abraham sets out a rival worship center, built an altar. But further, calls on the name of the Lord.

Now, I used to imagine that these were all private affairs. Build a small altar, pray to God. No. But you've got to remember that Abraham's entourage is actually quite sizable. You know, probably 70 to 100.

So about this size. And so his actions would have been public acts of worship. Not only was he proclaiming God's promises, he was also defying the gods of the land as he did it.

[ 8 : 02 ] So Abraham, as he was doing that, was making God's name great. That's wonderful, isn't it? Even as God's promise to make Abraham's name the same.

So this is Abraham, the man of faith, leaving his country, and then proclaiming the promises, and then building altars to proclaim the name of the Lord.

And so we come away from this story thinking, wow, Abraham, man of great faith. And then we expect that as we turn the page or go to the next story, that we'll just keep finding more stories of the same.

Right? Well, unfortunately, no. Because the next journey, the immediate journey he makes next, is a journey not done out of faith, but actually out of fear. And so let's move on to that story.

And this is what happened. There was famine in the land, it says, verse 10, and Abraham went down to Egypt to live for a while, because the famine was severe. But this time he had gone without God having told him to do so.

[ 9 : 02 ] Nor had he consulted God about it. And he's just laid claim to the promised land, and now he's leaving it. And notice, too, that when he arrives in Egypt, there are no altars, no calling on the name of the Lord, no acts of faith.

Instead, all his actions are motivated by fear. Back in Canaan, the fear was starvation for his family. But having arrived in Egypt, his fear is that his wife will be taken from him, and he be killed.

So we discover in verse 11, that Sarai is a beautiful woman. She's old, but still she's a beautiful woman. So that's something, isn't it?

Why are you guys laughing? She's 70 plus, you know. Anyway, let's get back to the story. And so he devises a plan, and he persuades Sarai to pass herself off as his sister.

And by doing this, he's hoped that he will be treated well on her account as well. His life will be spared because, as her brother, he would be her legal guardian, not having a father there.

[ 10 : 17 ] And also, should any man be interested in Sarai, then the custom was to negotiate with the guardian. And then, so that would give them a chance to escape before they actually have to act upon it.

And you know what? I mean, this wasn't actually a lie. Because Sarai was actually Abraham's half-sister. Of course, it was deceptive because it portrayed Sarai as being available to be married, when she clearly was not.

But I think the most important thing is that this action belied Abraham's lack of faith. I think that's the real problem for God. Abraham had forgotten God's promise to him to bless him, to make his name great.

Which meant his life was actually safe. He didn't have to worry. And so the events unfold in rapid succession. The Egyptians did fancy Sarai, just as Abraham feared.

But unfortunately, they praised her beauty to Pharaoh. And, you know, Pharaoh being the king, didn't bother to ask Abraham for permission. He just simply took her into his palace.

[ 11 : 31 ] In exchange, Abraham was indeed treated really well. Gift of sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, servants and camels. Now, I've been told that the female donkeys and camels in particular were actually luxury sort of goods or luxury vehicles in those days.

They're not used to carry goods. They were actually for riding on because you looked good riding on those animals. animals. So they're like the BMWs and Audis of their time.

Very generous gifts indeed. Of course, Sarai's life was now in danger. And more importantly, Abraham had just put God's promises of offspring into peril.

Should Sarai fall pregnant to Pharaoh? But God acts to safeguard his word. He remains faithful to his promises even when Abraham doesn't keep faith with those promises.

So in verse 17, God afflicts Pharaoh and his household. We don't know what the skin disease is. Probably a skin disease like boils or something. And here's the irony and travesty as well because instead of being God's blessing to others, Abraham that is, and especially when Pharaoh blesses Abraham, Abraham ends up doing the opposite, being a curse to Pharaoh.

[ 12 : 50 ] Now, Sarai must have been unaffected by this whole disease thing, which makes the Egyptians realize that she must be the cause. So Pharaoh summons Abraham and says this, What have you done to me?

He said, Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say she's my sister? So that I took her to be my wife. Now here, now then, here is your wife, take her and go.

And in that last sentence in Hebrew, there's actually only four words, Here, wife, take, go. That's how abrupt it was. Pharaoh couldn't get rid of Abraham fast enough.

And so what a contrast, isn't it, in this story compared to the last? There, Abraham was proclaiming God's promises. Now, he's all but silent. And that may be a good thing as well because imagine if he had given, Abraham proclaimed the Lord's name.

What a bad testimony he would have been. And so the story ends with Abraham being scent-packing with Sarai and all that he had. Now, presumably, he gets to keep Pharaoh's gifts.

[ 13 : 56 ] But lest you think that that's a sort of consolation prize, just see what his gifts will do to him in the future weeks. his livestock become a source of contention with lots as their servants fight over the resources of the land.

And those female servants, well, one of them turns out to be Hagar, the one Sarai gives to Abraham in chapter 16. And to her is born Ishmael.

What a lot of trouble Ishmael brings to both Abraham and Sarai. And so we see this act of fear, this one act of fear, continues to have negative repercussions even down the line.

Well, two stories here. And in one sense, I don't know about you, but I sort of take some comfort when I read stories like that. Because I see Abraham, this great man of faith, is just like us.

We too see our own journeys zigzagging, don't we, between faith and fear. So one moment we have such great faith, we see God's promises so clearly and we act on them.

[ 15 : 08 ] And then the very next moment we succumb to the smallest of fears. Sometimes the crises are real, like illness or loss of work, but other times they're just more perceived than real, aren't they?

Sometimes it's just the fear of losing something or having our hopes dashed. We feel like we're not progressing fast enough or people around us are progressing faster. better results than us, better pay, smarter children.

And so we're tempted to do what Abraham did, take matters into our own hands, stop trusting God and give in to temptation. So these are comforting stories, but I'm sure that that's not what the Bible is trying to teach us, is it?

That it's okay to zigzag between faith and fear. It may be true that we live a bit like Abraham, but what can we actually learn from these stories?

How do we live our lives so that it's more by faith than by fear? Well, the first thing to realize is that God's promises don't rest on us.

[ 16 : 16 ] And so we've come to that final heading now, a life of faith. Thankfully, they rest on God himself, who he is, rather than how strong our faith is. And so we saw in that story that even though Abraham failed, God's promises to him didn't.

And that's the same for us. Often we think that the amount of our faith is what matters. Well, it doesn't. What matters is the object of our faith.

Who do we trust rather than the amount of faith we have in him? You can have lots of faith, but it's useless if your faith is actually in the wrong thing. Well, let me illustrate.

Suppose you're caught in a cyclone and you could choose between one of two shelters. A hut like this or a bunker like that. Imagine that the bunker has doors as well.

I couldn't find a picture. So, which would you choose? The bunker, I hope. What would you choose, Jess? Yeah, okay.

[ 17 : 23 ] Imagine the doors are there. But suppose you really believe that the hut could do the job. Does the amount of faith you have in the hut actually increase your chances of survival?

It doesn't, does it? You can believe all you like, but it's not going to make any difference. On the other hand, if you chose the bunker, and provided you stayed in it and you shut the door close, then how much faith you actually have doesn't matter, does it?

That's why Jesus says that you only need faith the size of a mustard seed. But this faith, small as it is, must be placed in God and his son, Jesus.

Your life of faith is not dependent on how much faith you have, but how much on who you have that faith in. And it has to be God, and in particular, the promises in his word, what he said he'll do.

But let's be clear here because God's promises to Abraham are not for us. I hope you realize that. He hasn't promised to make us great or for each of us to be a great nation.

[ 18 : 35 ] No, where we benefit, however, is in verse 3, for we are the ones that God will bless through Abraham. But the way God achieves it is in and through his son, Jesus. He's the offspring of Abraham, and it's in him that all the nations are blessed.

So that's why in the second reading tonight, Paul can say in 2 Corinthians 1 and verse 20, for no matter how many promises God has made, they are yes in Christ.

And so through him, the amen is spoken by us to the glory of God. But it's only in Christ that God's promises are yes. Why is that? Because whereas Abraham failed, whereas we fail, Jesus is the only human that didn't.

Only he trusted in his Father all the way unto death on the cross. And so as John says in his first letter, 1 John, because he died for our sins, he's the only one able to speak to the Father in our defense, and therefore do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

And so even as we trust in God's promises, that was the first bullet point, it's our faith in Christ's work, his death on the cross, that secures those promises for us.

[ 19 : 51 ] That's why the promises are yes, but only in Christ. Only we put our faith in his work on the cross. But then, if that's not enough, God does one more thing.

For Paul goes on to say in verse 21, it should be on the screen, yep. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

What an amazing thing, isn't it? For not only has God promised to bless us in Christ, and he will absolutely fulfill that because he's a God of truth, not only has he sent his Son to die for us, which he's already done, so that's a done deal, but now God also promises his spirit to us so that we will have the power to believe.

He's, as it were, come around to our side of the table and gives us the power to persevere, to keep trusting in him, thereby guaranteeing what is to come. So what's there left for us to do if God's done everything?

Well, in comparison to God, probably nothing really, but nothing except to put our mustard seed faith in God. So friends, if you're here tonight and you haven't put your faith in God, then this is where you need to start.

[ 21 : 17 ] Again, don't think it's how much faith you have. No, it's about who you put your faith in. But then the same applies for the rest of us in our lives.

Every time a crisis hits, instead of fear, what we need to do is come back to these three things. Come back to God's promises to us. Know them so well that we immediately call them to mind when we need it.

But let's remember, though, that what God has promised us is not what we want from him. So there's no promise of trouble-free days, but just patience and endurance through them.

No promise of monetary riches, but just contentment, whatever we do have. No worldly blessings like fame and achievements, indeed these are blessings, but spiritual blessings that outweigh all of them.

I mean, he didn't even promise us a long life, did he? But he's promised us eternal life and to be known by God. So we need to come back to those promises, come back to what God says in his word.

[ 22 : 26 ] And then second, we need to remember that all this is secured by Christ's work. It's not what we've done, but what Christ has done. And then thirdly, we need to remember and remind ourselves that God's spirit, God himself, will empower us to stand firm, to keep trusting him instead of succumbing to fear.

So three things, God's promises, Christ's work, the spirit's power, and then our small mustard seed faith in those amazing things.

That's what a life of faith is all about. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the stories of Abraham to show us how the heroes of the faith can fall and fail.

and yet we do not want to take from that that we too can be slipshod with the way we live our lives. Help us to realize that it is not how much faith we have, but who we have our faith in.

Trusting in your son, Jesus, and remembering your promises, and even the promise that your spirit is with us to help us to believe.

[ 23 : 50 ] Father, for those of us who are in the midst of crisis and fear, Father, we want to pray for them particularly tonight. Help them to see that their fears are actually much, much smaller than what we think them to be because of who God is.

That our God is much, much bigger than whatever fears or trials that we've been put through. Give them courage to keep walking by faith.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you.