

**Hebrews 11:8-19**  
**(Genesis 12:1-4; 22:1-8)**  
**“By Faith Abraham Obeyed When He Was Called”**

## **Introduction**

When last we were together, we studied the story of Noah and the great flood, and saw God’s grief over our sin, and the majesty both of his judgment and of his mercy. The stories we find recorded in Genesis between the flood and the call of Abraham are a sad summary of human history in every age: Humanity quickly turns away from God, building cities like Babel in defiance of his grace, and seeking to display human wisdom and prowess apart from God. Such projects are always doomed to fail, and from the rubble of man’s city, God again calls those who will set out on pilgrimage toward the city of God, seeking his righteousness and his glory, and so bringing life and hope back into human history.

Next to the life of Jesus, Abraham’s life serves as the supreme illustration of what it means to live on the critical edge of complete and utter trust in God. This was Abraham’s unique calling and ministry: to follow God radically, wherever that might lead, and so to become the father of all who believe in God’s promises (see Romans 4:11f). God’s promise to Abraham was staggering: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2f). Who else, but our Lord Jesus, through whom that tremendous promise is fulfilled, could possibly claim such a calling from God?

And yet, in the deepest sense, we who hear the gospel calling us to follow Jesus are entrusted with that same calling as Father Abraham, and are invited into the same pilgrimage of faith, although we have been granted the privilege of seeing more clearly than Abraham could see how God is accomplishing salvation, and we have been entrusted with the Holy Spirit in the resurrection power of the New Covenant. So, what does that mean? How are we to relate to this magisterial figure, Abraham, the Father of all who believe God’s promises? How am I, living in the technological twenty-first century West to emulate in any meaningful way the life of an ancient Middle-eastern sheik?

It has been frequently noted that when we read the ancient myths and legends, even the greatest poetry of ancient Greece and Rome, we feel the distance and the strangeness of the past, and a certain lack of depth in the development of character. But when we read the stories of the patriarchs, we see ourselves, and those we know – in different dress, perhaps, but there we are – in all our complexity, brokenness and beauty.

## Body

### 1. What lessons does this text invite to learn from Abraham?

*We must understand the nature of man's city: It is fleeting.*

"These all died in faith ... having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth" (11:13b). Probably the supreme mistake we make as God's people is to confuse what is lasting with what is fleeting, and so forget that here we are aliens and strangers. Jim Elliot understood this well in his best-known line, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

*We must understand the nature of the city of God: It is better than the best we taste here.*

"But as it is they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (11:16). Are you ever homesick for the city of God? If you say, "I never think of it," I would suggest that you think of it all the time without even knowing it. When you long for love that is faithful and strong, for truth that is clear and compelling, for beauty that is passionate and unfading, when you long for family that will never fail you, for friends who will never abandon you, for work that really matters, you are longing for God's city. C.S. Lewis frequently made the point that life creates hungers that cannot be satisfied by any merely earthly food. This is, Lewis claimed, because God wants us to be hungry for what only he can give us, and so to seek our final satisfaction in him.

*Once we set out for the city of God, we must refuse to turn back.*

"If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return" (11:15). There is no one quite so miserable as the one who is at home in neither world. Some immigrants fall into this: they miss their home of origin, but could never go back. So they live here, but pine away longing for what is now gone. What a miserable marriage partner is the one who always looks back on childhood as the happiest of times. We used to sing, "I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back, no turning back."

*God will not be not ashamed to be called our God, for he has prepared a city for us.*

What does all this matter? Just this: Those who are looking for and longing for God's city please God, and he does not disappoint them. He is "not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city" (11:16). Is God ashamed to be called our God?

## 2. But how did Abraham learn these lessons of faith?

*Abraham obeyed when God called him to let go of his past (Genesis 12).*

There is a peculiar linguistic implication in this strange Hebrew construction, pointing to an issue of core personal identity. Abraham is confronting the most basic issues: Who am I, and how am I to discover myself? Why am I here? This Hebrew phrase, *lech lecha*, used only in these two places (Genesis 12 & 22), at these two crisis points in Abraham's life, carries an ambiguity of meaning: Go *from* yourself, or go *by* yourself, or go *to yourself*. Abraham is being called to leave everything that has furnished his context for understanding himself and his place in the world.

The emotional intensity of the moment is reflected in the very word order: "Go from your *country* and your *kindred* and your *father's house*." This is the reverse of the normal word order. When you leave, you first leave the house, then the kindred, and finally the country. But the word order here is intentional to show the intensity of emotion. It is hard enough to leave one's country, but more painful to leave one's kin; and it is hardest of all to leave one's home. Yet this was required of Abraham, as in a deep and troubling sense it is required of each of us who hear God's voice saying, "Come, follow me. Trust me alone to give your life meaning. Choose my blessing over the vain promises of this present age that cannot deliver what you truly need."

We see also the temptation to insecurity: "Go ... to the land that I will show you." Where are we going? What will it look like when we arrive? We want to plan, to know ahead of time, to have our food and lodging secured in advance. But God says, "Set out on your journey, and trust me to get you where I want you to go, and to provide for you when you get there." This is the essence of the life of faith. It acts on God's promises. And here the promise is, as we have said, spectacular: "In you, all the families of the earth will be blessed."

Abraham was already getting on in years when God called him. He had lived in one of the greatest cities of the ancient world, and had, by now, figured out who he was and what his life was all about. Or so he thought. But God now speaks into his life, and nothing will ever be the same, for Abraham or for the world. All of human history hinges on Abraham's trust in God, and on his obedience.

*Abraham obeyed when God called him to let go of his future (Genesis 22).*

After following God to the land of promise, after walking with God for twenty-five years as the promise of a son is repeated over and over again until it must have seemed a cruel joke, at last Abraham and Sarah receive the promised son, and name him Isaac, "Laughter." When Isaac is old enough to

travel with his father, old enough to climb a mountain and carry wood for a burnt offering, when he is old enough for his father to know his ways, his unique and wonderful personality, old enough for his father to think of him not merely as his son, but as his dearest friend, the Lord again calls to Abraham, using again this strange phrase *lech lecha*: *Go from yourself, by yourself, to yourself.*

And once again the very order of the words gives emphasis to the intensity of the emotion: “Take *your son*, your *only son Isaac*, *whom you love.*” Abraham has trusted God when things seemed physically impossible to fulfill his promise of an heir through whom blessing would come to all the peoples of the world. Here he is, the apple of his eye, the incarnation of God’s love and salvation, of God’s power to fulfill what he has promised.

If Abraham is certain of one thing, it is this: Isaac is the living proof that Abraham’s life has meaning, and that his years of obedience have not been in vain. And now this God whom he has trusted is asking of him the unthinkable. Abraham, who pled for God to spare Sodom and Gomorra, is now being told to sacrifice his only son.

God also refuses again to divulge exactly where Abraham is to go. He is simply told to set out for the land of Moriah, and he will be shown the particular mountain when God decides to reveal it. The style here is minimalist and elegant, a shroud of silence protecting the privacy of Abraham’s anguished perplexity.

All that we need to know is this: He arose early in the morning, took his son and set out for the land of Moriah. In extremis, asked to do the most awful thing that could be required of a parent, Abraham trusted that somehow God would work all things together for his good and for the good of his son, that he would resolve the crisis and bring all things to their appointed end. Once again, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

There is a phrase used here twice by Abraham that seems to me to summarize the life of faith: When God calls to him, Abraham responds, “Here am I” (22:1). And in agony of heart, as he climbs the mountain with his son, and his beloved Isaac, perplexed that there is wood and fire, but no lamb to offer in sacrifice turns to him and says, “My father!” Abraham responds, “Here am I, my son” (22:7). When we are well past understanding God’s ways, when we feel that our hearts will break, our minds shatter, our wills collapse in the face of what is asked of us, we have only to answer, “Here am I. I do not understand you, my great God and King, but I trust you.” And he points Isaac to God: “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

## Conclusion

We can see from our perspective what Abraham could not see from his: God has provided the lamb, and it turned out to be God's Son, his only Son Jesus, whom he loves. As John the Baptist said, pointing at Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

The life of faith begins for you and me as it did for Father Abraham, with a first *lech lecha*: Go from yourself, by yourself, to yourself. Let go of your past, of those things that have defined you and determined you and given you your sense of meaning and significance, of your life somehow mattering. Let all that go, counting it, in the apostle Paul's words, mere "rubbish" (Philippians 3:7,8) compared to knowing God by sharing in the life of his Son, Jesus.

But know this: The time will come for most of us when we will hear a second *lech lecha*, and realize that God is now calling us to trust him more than we trust any visible manifestation of his love for us, even if it calls us to offer him the most precious person or thing in our life. God alone will be our God, because he alone *is* God. And what is required of us is simply to say, whatever comes, "Here am I."

We say it in response to God, and we say it to those who look to us for answers and for comfort, wanting us to explain to them the meaning of what we are going through. With Abraham, we simply say, "Here am I." I may not understand what is happening, and my heart is breaking, too, but I will not leave you alone on this mountain, because I know that God is with us and that "he who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all [will] also with him graciously give us all things. ... For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:32, 38,39).

© John M. Wood, all rights reserved