

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear Friends in Christ,

I am glad you are here today, and I am excited to be here today to share with you God's wisdom and God's truth. I think I have the best job in the world. I get to study God's Word and listen to the voice of our Good Shepherd. Then I get to share what he says with others corporately, that is, when we gather together in large groups. I get to share it when we have smaller groups gathering. I get to share it with people individually that need the God's wisdom spoken into their particular situation in life. It's an awesome job, and I thank you for calling me as your pastor and allowing me to do this.

Today we are talking about an essential truth of Christianity, yet it is a truth that many Christians don't understand... they don't get it. What makes this teaching so difficult is not that it is a difficult teaching, but it is a teaching that overlaps in usage with the world around us. Since this word is common in secular usage, it skews and influences our understanding of the word in Biblical usage. The word in question is: faith.

What's so important about faith? Without faith, we are enemies of God. Without faith our sins are not forgiven, we cannot be saved. Without faith it is impossible to please God. Jesus often rebuked his own disciples for having little faith. That disturbed Jesus because faith is so important. So what is faith?

I don't know of a better story in Scripture for defining faith like the one before us today: Genesis 12:1-8 which is the story of the calling of Abraham. If you're like me, definitions are not always helpful. I much prefer to see examples of the word used in a sentence... then I get it. So rather than define faith, we're going to look at story that illustrates an example of what faith is and how faith works. It is the story of Abram.

So let's learn about faith by just jumping right into the story of the calling of Abram. Sometimes it's helpful to get our bearings on the timeline. We recently heard how God created Adam and Eve... it didn't take long for them to fall into sin. Yet God in his love promised a descendent of the woman who would crush the serpent's head. Adam and Eve believed this promise, and passed it on to their descendants. However, many did not believe. The world became more and more wicked. By the time of Noah only he and his family believed God's promise of a Savior. God sent the worldwide flood, but it didn't take long for descendants of Noah's family to ignore God's promises. As the world again descended into idolatry, God again takes action. God called Abraham. So the date of the story we're looking at today is roughly 2,000 years before Christ... or 4,000 years ago from today. So, yes, from a 4,000 year old story, we are going to learn what all about faith as God defines it.

Genesis 12:1-8

12 The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."

Abram was born and raised in Ur. That is in present day southeast Iraq. His father then moved to Haran which is southern Turkey near the border with Syria. God then called him from there to go to some land that he would show him. Yes, God called Abraham to pack up and start traveling to make his new home in a place he would show him only after they were already underway. But God doesn't give commands without also giving promises:

**2 “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.**

**3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”**

Look at the amazing cluster of promises God gave to Abram. We’ll list the promises and later we’ll talk about why these promises are so incredible: 1) He promises a particular land to Abram and his descendants. Here it’s implied in the command to go to the land he would show him. Later in this reading God makes the promise explicit. 2) The promise that Abram’s descendants would be numerous... in fact, so many they would become an entire nation of people. 3) God promises Abram’s name would be great...essentially meaning Abram would be world famous, and acclaimed. 4) God promises that he is with Abram, and will protect him. 5) And the last one is the big one: All peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.

Somehow, some way, God promised that people from every nation under the sun would be blessed through Abram. As history unfolds, we find that this promise was the promise of the Savior. That seed of the woman promised to Adam and Eve who would crush the serpent’s head would be a descendent of Abram. We know him as Jesus, and he is indeed a blessing to every nation on earth.

What have we learned about faith so far? 1) Faith is initiated by God. We are told of nothing special about Abram. Yet out of nowhere, God approaches him and makes grandiose promises.

2) To create faith, God makes unconditional promises. He doesn’t say, “Abram, if you do this, then do that, and full fill this condition, and perform that ritual, then I will bless you in these ways.” No, God just says, “I promise that I will...” 3) The promises he makes are incredible!

Faith in us starts the same way. God initiates it. God speaks to us in his Word with his promises. All blessings come to us through Jesus. His perfect life for us. His sacrifice the payment for all of our sin. Without Jesus there is only curse. But with Jesus, there is:

- Forgiveness
- Heaven
- Children of God
- Guidance in life
- Protection to eternal life
- Assurance: Chosen from eternity

So... Faith starts when God calls us through the gospel... when God speaks and God promises.

Life changes for a person when they start listening to God. (Word and sacrament.) Faith is created when we hear what God has done and is doing and what God promises. Do you know? What is God doing? What is God saying? What if God started talking to Abraham, and he stuck his fingers in his ears and said, “la, la, la” I’m not listening! I’m too busy! I have other things to do.” This would have changed the course of his life. It all starts with listening to God and his promises, and know God and his history.

What is God saying. What is God doing? Do you know? You *will* know if you will simply pick up your Bible and read it. Or go to church and listen to it. Or attend Sunday morning Bible class. Or seek godly advice from your pastor or from fellow members of Good Shepherd. If you rarely listen to God, you will have a weak faith... or no faith. It’s that simple. Faith starts with God and his promises.

And now we see the response of faith. James wrote, “Faith without works is dead.” Where there is trust in God, there is also obedience to God. We see three responses of faith from Abram. **4 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 Haran. 5 He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.**

1) Abram packs up the u-haul and heads out to a land God promised to show him. Talk about a leap of faith! By the way, that phrase “the people they had acquired in Haran”... some commentators think that the Hebrew indicates these were not slaves. These were converts. It’s implied that Abram didn’t keep quiet about the promises of God, but was an evangelist. Those who believe in the one true God stayed with Abram and moved with him, trusting all of God’s promises.

But Abram’s faith was evident in more than just the big move:
6 Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7 The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him. 8 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.

What two additional responses of faith are here? 2) Worship. Abram builds an altar – two of them actually. The two locations aren’t all that far apart. They are in the heart of what would become the land of Israel. They were north of Jerusalem. Abram was compelled to formally worship and praise God by building these altars.

And there was a third response of faith: 3) Abram called on the name of the Lord. We don’t use that phrase today, but it likely meant that Abram was publicly proclaiming the name of the one true God who saves. Again, he was being an evangelist. He couldn’t keep quiet about his faith in this God who promises so many incredible things.

Everything God had promised to Abram seemed impossible. Father of many nations? He was a 75 year old man, and his wife was barren. The land of Canaan will be his? Strong nations already inhabited the land. Abram name would be great. He was a nobody nomad without an heir. All nations would be blessed through him? I’m sure Abram couldn’t even imagine what that would look like, much less how it would be fulfilled.

However, Abram believed. God promised the impossible. Abram had no idea how it would happen. But Abram believed.

God calls us to believe also. His promises to us don’t seem any less impossible. Forgiveness. But my sin! Eternal life. But everyone dies! You will live in glory. But life seems so hard and unfair! Yet, like Abram, God invites us to believe.

And what does this mean to believe... to have faith?

- Not a feeling floating on nothing. A trust based on a promise and a track record.
- Faith is fully resting upon an object, knowing it will hold you. (You need faith in a chair to truly rest. Yet your faith is not what made the chair strong... it already was. Your faith is also not what’s supporting your weight. The chair is.

- Faith says, “I don’t know how God will work this out, but he made a promise, so I will rest upon it.
- You’ve heard the phrase, “You just have to take a leap of faith.” There’s truth in that saying. God always keeps his promises. But *how* will he?! I don’t know. That part he doesn’t reveal... he just will! But the good news is, he always has.

Where there is true faith, there will be decisive action. (Faith without works is dead.) Just as Abram’s faith was evident in his move, in his worship, and in his evangelism... so also, our faith will be evident by our obedience.

Like Abram, those who believe God’s promises also then do what God says. God gives us his law. He hasn’t told you to pack up and move, but he has told you to love God above all things: To honor his name... to listen to his Word. He’s told us to honor and respect all who hold authority over us... to defend and protect his gift of life... to be sexually pure... to properly use the money and resources he has entrusted to us... to uphold the good reputation of others... to be content with our lot in life. Where there is faith there will be the desire and intent to obey these and all commands from God.

Where there is a faith, there is a response of worship. That’s why we’re here. WE can’t help but gather together to praise the name of our God together. And we proclaim, like Abram did. We can’t help but tell others about the saving work of our great God. Here in Midtown Omaha we have an altar to the Lord and we are publicly calling on the name of the Lord, because, BY FAITH, we recognize that our God is worthy our praise, and there aren’t nearly enough people doing it!

So what is faith? It is a complete reliance upon God for life and salvation... a reliance created by God approaching us in his Word with a promise of salvation through Christ Jesus that changes our sinful hearts. Because we have heard and believe, we obey God. We worship him. We proclaim his word to the nations. Through Abram we have learned that God blesses us in every way... BY FAITH. Amen.