

The Ups and Downs of Faith

by Roger Ellsworth

Faith is a matter of degrees, and even after failure, there is always the possibility of spiritual renewal and returning to a life of faith and vitality.

Duration: 30:32

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-13, Matthew 6:33, James 2:17

Topics: "Faith"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the story of the prodigal son from Luke chapter 15. He emphasizes the theme of faith and how it can fluctuate in the life of a believer. The preacher encourages listeners not to be discouraged by their wavering faith, but to remember that they can always return to God. He also highlights the importance of repentance and humility, using the example of the prodigal son who humbly returns to his father and is welcomed with open arms. The sermon concludes with the reminder that no matter how far we may feel from God, we can always find our way back to Him.

Transcript

Please find again the book of Genesis, and today we're looking at verses in chapter 12 and also the opening verses of chapter 13. And the message today has the title, The Ups and Downs of Faith. I wonder if you can identify with that title.

I wonder how long you've been a child of God. And I wonder if you have been a child of God a long time, and this is your testimony. My faith has fluctuated on me.

It sometimes is at a very high level, and other times it is at a very low level. I think one of the most important things for those of us who know the Lord to understand is that faith is a matter of degrees. It's not a matter of being on a constant level.

It's a matter of degrees. If we could liken faith to a fire, we might be able to say that there are times when the flame burns brightly, and there are other times whenever it's just barely flickering long. And you may even be inclined today to say, well, pastor, I'm not sure I have even the flicker.

My faith is down kind of just to the glowing embers. Well, we need to realize that faith is a matter of degrees. And we see that brought out here in the life of Abraham.

One of the things I love about the Bible is that it is brutally honest about its greatest heroes. I'm telling you that the Bible, when it talks about one of its greatest heroes, it's not inclined to sweep any information under the rug. No.

The Bible just puts it all out there, and the Bible does this with Abraham. Now, Abraham was certainly a great, great man of God. In a recent sermon here at Parkview, I talked about how that there were three men in the Old Testament who tower over the other men, and I mentioned Moses, and I mentioned David, and I also mentioned Abraham.

Abraham is one of those towering figures in the Old Testament. And Abraham was such a towering figure, such a great man of faith, that you and I, if it were not for the fact that the Bible is so brutally honest about him, you and I might be inclined to say, well, Abraham was such a great, great man that I certainly can't identify with him. You can identify with Abraham because even though Abraham was this great man of faith, he experienced what you and I experienced.

He experienced the ups and the downs of faith. We find Abraham fluctuating in faith right here in these verses that I read a moment ago. And so I want you to think with me about Abraham succeeding in faith, that's point number one, and then secondly, faltering in faith, and thirdly, being renewed in faith.

Abraham succeeding in faith, Abraham faltering in faith, and Abraham being renewed in his faith. Now, when we come here to this twelfth chapter of Genesis, we find Abraham succeeding in his faith, and my, he shines here as a wonderful example of faith in these verses that I read a moment ago, beginning in Genesis 12 and verse 4. I say that Abraham is succeeding in faith at this point for a couple of reasons. One thing that we find is Abraham is here living in obedience to God.

Now, you know the story of Abraham. You know that he was born and spent his early years over in the region that we know as Mesopotamia. More specifically, in his younger years, he was in a place called Haran, H-A-R-A-N.

But then something totally unexpected happened. God, as it were, tapped Abram on the shoulder. Abraham, as he was coming up, was an idolater.

He was worshipping the false gods that his family had probably worshipped for years. But God came in. God invaded his life.

God laid hold of him, and God said to him, Abraham, I want you to go to a land that I am going to show you. I'll tell you, Abraham was put in something of a difficult position because he was called to live on the bare, we might say, the naked Word of God. And Abraham, being strong in faith at this time, did exactly what God told him to do.

God said, go to a land that I will show you, and we might say that he pulled up stakes, and off he went. And he left the land that he was born and reared in. He left the region of Mesopotamia.

He left Haran, and off he went to this land of Canaan. And this is the land that God was to show him. When Abram got there, there wasn't any welcoming committee.

There wasn't a band playing. There wasn't anybody there to give him the key to one of the major cities. The red carpet wasn't rolled out.

But all Abram had was just the Word of God. Abram, this is where I want you to live. This is the land to which I have called you.

And so we have to admire Abram at this point, because he was living in obedience to God. By the way, this is always one of the evidences of real faith, and this is one of the evidences of strong faith. Don't say I have faith if you're not interested in obedience to God.

The two go together. You might recall what we read over in the book of James. James says, faith without works is dead.

Now, there are a lot of people, we have many right here in our own community, a lot of people who this very day would say, I have faith in God, but they won't obey the Lord. They won't obey the Lord. And oh, I tell you, they are deceived with a delusion right out of hell itself, because faith always leads to obedience.

And if there's no obedience, we don't have any right to conclude that we have faith. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that Christians will be perfect in obedience.

We're about to come here to the second point of the sermon. I'm going to talk to you here in just a moment about Abram faltering in faith. And yes, we do falter in faith.

We're not perfect in our obedience is a far cry from saying that we're not interested in obedience at all and that we never obey. Faith always leads to obedience and obedience always gives evidence that faith exists. So this is one thing that we find when Abram was succeeding in his faith.

And as we read further here, in this 12th chapter of Genesis, we find that when he got to the land of Canaan, he began building altars and Abram would build an altar and there he would worship the Lord. And then he went to another place there in the land of Canaan and there he built another altar and there he worshiped the Lord. And that also, ladies and gentlemen, is a sign of true faith where there is a spirit of worship.

Abram had a spirit of worship. There was something in him that caused him to want to worship God. He knew God.

God had revealed himself and Abram now wanted to worship God. And this is always an indication of true faith. I have to marvel again as I talk about this at the many people right here in our own area who say, yes, yes, I have faith in God.

No, no, I'm not interested in worshiping God. Not interested in worshiping God, the God that they say that they believe in, the God that they say that they trust. Oh, my friends, it's impossible.

It's as impossible as a square circle to say that you have faith in God and you don't have any interest in worship. Well, here's Abram then. And we certainly have to admire him, don't we? Because, my, he's doing so well here.

He's succeeding in his faith. God has spoken to him. He's called him to live on his word, God's word, and Abraham immediately begins to do so.

He shows that he has true faith by obeying the Lord. He goes out to this land of Canaan. He shows that he has true faith by worshiping the Lord.

And it would be just wonderful if we could just leave the story of Abraham there. But we are talking about the ups and downs of faith. And after Abraham succeeds for a while in faith, he begins to falter in faith.

I wonder if you noticed it whenever I read this passage a while ago, verse 10 of Genesis chapter 12, now there was a famine in the land. There was a famine in the land. God had called Abram to live in the land of Canaan.

And Abram hadn't been there very long until a famine arose. Now, I know that there are some people who would have us to believe that if we believe in God and if we live for God and if we serve God, we'll never have any problems whatsoever. I have to tell you, people who hold that view are reading a different Bible than I read.

I don't find this to be true. I don't find it in the Bible that if you live for God, you'll not have any problems. You might want to look at the book of Job.

Here's a man who lived for God. I'd say Job had a problem or two along the way, wouldn't you? And you might want to look at the life of the apostle Paul in the New Testament. I'd say that Paul lived for God, wouldn't you? My Paul was a, oh, how devoted that man was.

But Paul had his problems. Over there in 2 Corinthians chapter 11, if I'm not mistaken in my recollection here, in 2 Corinthians chapter 11, Paul mentions 23 different kinds of suffering that he had to endure as he tried to carry out his ministry, as he tried to live for the Lord. Don't buy into this business, this teaching that says live for God and all your problems will be over.

I talked to my class a little while ago about the life of Joseph, and here's a man who lived for God, Joseph, back in the Old Testament, back here in this very book of Genesis. What do you find to be true of Joseph? You find the Bible saying, well, now Joseph lived for God, and guess what, folks, he didn't have any troubles at all. That's not what I read here in the book of Genesis about the life of Joseph.

I find, yes, Joseph lived for God, and he was hated by his brothers. He was sold into slavery in Egypt. He was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife.

He landed in prison. That doesn't sound like an absence of trouble to me. Does it sound like an absence of trouble to you? Now, you might want to read here in Genesis chapter 12 that God called Abram to leave Haran, and he called him to go to the land of Canaan, and Abram went to the land of Canaan, and he got down there to the land of Canaan, and he lived happily ever after.

End of story. No, it's not the end of the story. Abram gets down there into the land of Canaan, and now there in that tenth verse, there was a famine in the land, a famine in the land, and I will tell you what Abram should have done.

By the way, I'm pretty good at this business of telling you what others should do or should have done. I'm not so good at doing the right thing myself whenever trouble comes my way, but I think I have good authority for saying this to you. I think that the Word of God that I hold here in my hand will back me up at this point.

I think that Abram should have stayed in the land of Canaan even when the famine arose. Don't you? Because God told him, you go to a land that I will show you, and you dwell there. God didn't say, now Abram, you go down there to the land of Canaan, and if things begin to deteriorate, if the going gets

rough, if you encounter hardship, if you encounter trials, if you encounter difficulty, then you can leave the land and go down to Egypt.

No, God just said, you go and you dwell in this land, this land that I will show you, and it happened to be the land of Canaan. And I'm just silly enough to believe, folks, that the God who commanded Abram to go down there to the land of Canaan would also have sustained Abram there, even during the famine. Yes, I believe that this God who called Abraham to go there and this God who called Abraham to live there would have taken care of Abram while he was there in the land of Canaan.

With a famine raging, yes, even in the midst of a famine. Because I believe that this God with whom we're dealing today is greater than famines. I think he would have sustained Abram.

Don't you? I think he would have found a way, even while this famine was going on, to keep Abram and his family going. But Abram falters in his faith because we read here in this same 10th verse that after the famine arose in the land, Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there. And oh, Abram faltered in Egypt, didn't he? You have the story here about, well, he's on his way down to Egypt.

He's trying to escape this famine. He's faltering in his faith. God doesn't tell him to go to Egypt.

Abram just decides this on his own. And then after he gets down there to Egypt, well, it's while he's going to Egypt. He gets to looking at Sarah and he says, known at this time by the name Sarai, and he says, my, I've been blessed of the Lord to marry such a beautiful woman.

And I get down there to Egypt and they're going to see how pretty she is. Well, they're going to kill me and take her away from me. It's kind of interesting, isn't it? That Abram would be worried about this thing because the God who had called him to go to the land of Canaan had also promised to give him descendants.

And this promise couldn't have been fulfilled if Abram was put to death down there in Egypt, because at this point he doesn't have descendants. You see the thing that Abram was called to do at the first was to live on the basis of the bare word of God. And he did that for a while.

And he's called now to continue to live on the basis of that naked word of God. Abram, I'm going to sustain you. You're going to have descendants.

Abraham, he's all a flutter now. Oh, if I go down there to Egypt and they see how pretty Sarah is, they'll kill me. Well, if they killed him, that would have been the end of the promise.

He can't trust God here to keep him alive, even though God has promised that he's going to keep him alive. Abram, you're going to have descendants. He didn't have any yet.

He's called to continue to live on the basis of God's word. But he's faltering now. By the way, brothers and sisters in Christ, you and I are called to live on the basis of God's word.

We're to live on the basis of God's word when lots of people are living on the basis of God's word. In times where the churches are full, and thank God there have been such times, but we're also called to live on the basis of the word of God when the churches are, as we see today, half empty or half full. We're called to live on the basis of the word of God when opinion polls reflect that people essentially hold to Christian teachings and Christian values.

And there have been such times in America where most of the people held to Christian teachings and Christian values. And, oh, it's so wonderful to hold on to the word of God, to believe the word of God when we have confirmation. Ah, look at the public opinion polls.

Most people agree with Christian principles. Ladies and gentlemen, we're called to live on the basis of the word of God even when the opinion polls show, as they usually do today, that people are straying from Christian values and Christian teachings. We're called to live on the word of God when it's popular and when it's not popular.

Abraham was called to live on the basis of the word of God. He faltered in his faith. He left the land when the famine set in.

He lied about Sarah and, well, it didn't turn out very well down there in Egypt, did it? And so Abraham then is compelled to do the thing that he should have done anyway. He's compelled to go back to the land of Canaan, the land that he should never have left. Look at verse 1 of chapter 13.

Then Abraham went up from Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had. And down there in verse 4, and this is so very important for us to notice today, to the place of the altar which he had made at the first. And there Abraham called on the name of the Lord.

Oh, I tell you there's good news in this passage of Scripture. There's good news as we trace the spiritual journey of Abraham. We've traced him.

We have found him succeeding in faith. We have found him faltering in faith. But now we find him being renewed in faith.

I've got a good encouraging word for all of you Christians who find yourself, have found yourself faltering in your faith and may find yourself in that position today. The good word I have for you is this. There is such a thing as spiritual renewal.

There's such a thing as spiritual renewal. I am so glad I can be able to say to you today that failure is not final in the life of the child of God. Failure is not final in the life of the child of God.

It may be that you're sitting here today, brother in Christ or sister in Christ, and you have so miserably failed in your Christianity that you feel as if God is through with you. You feel as if God has washed his hands of you. You feel as if there's no way back for you.

I want you to know that God's grace, I'm talking to Christian people who have, who are keenly conscious of having failed the Lord. I want you to know, brother in Christ, sister in Christ, that the grace of God is greater than your sin. The grace of God is greater than your sin.

There is such a thing as renewal. There is such a thing as revival. And by the way, revival is not just a meeting that Baptists have when the notion strikes them.

I sometimes think that we too easily equate revival with a series of meetings and having in an evangelist and that kind of thing and having special services. No, a revival meeting is not a revival. We should know that very well.

We've had lots and lots and lots of revival meetings, haven't we, where there wasn't any sign of true revival. Revival is something that only a child of God can experience. Just tear that word apart and you'll

see what revival is.

Of course, the root word there means life or vitality, and the prefix re means back. Revival is back to life or back to vitality. And I'm saying to you today, child of God, if you have strayed from the Lord, if you have allowed things into your life that you should not have allowed, if you have failed to do things as a Christian that you are responsible under God to do, and you're sitting here today with a load of guilt, and you're sitting here today with a keen consciousness of failure, I'm so glad to be able to say to you that there is such a thing as revival.

You can go back to life. You can go back to vitality. Don't you find your Bible saying over there in 1 John chapter 1, if we, this is written to Christian people, if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all iniquity.

You may be sitting here today saying, well, pastor, I have failed the Lord. I'm like Abram when he was down there in Egypt lying about his wife. That's where I am.

I did well for a while in my Christian journey, but now, but here lately, I've slipped so much. I'm so far from God. Listen, you're not so far from God that you can't go home again.

You're not so far from God that you can't get close to the Lord again. I love the story that Jesus told in Luke chapter 15 about the prodigal son. Don't you find that story touching your heart? Here's the younger of the two sons and he comes to his father on this occasion and he says, father, give to me the goods that fall to me.

What he wanted was his inheritance. He wanted it while his dad was, he wasn't content to wait for his dad to die so he could get the inheritance. He wanted it right then, which essentially amounted to this young man.

This is a brazen, arrogant thing to say. Essentially what the young man is saying is, dad, I wish today was the day of your funeral and my brother and I were dividing up the inheritance, that we were dividing up the estate. Now, I have two sons and I can tell you that if one of my two sons had ever come up to me and said, dad, I wish today was the day of your funeral, it would have been the day of his funeral.

But what a shocking thing for this young man to say. And this father divides the inheritance. He gives this young man the portion of the inheritance that would have been coming to him if he had waited until his dad had died.

And the young man takes the money that he receives and off he goes and now he's down here, the Bible says, in the far country and he's engaged in godless living. And he's squandering the money that he has received. I wonder if I have found you today when I talk about the far country.

I wonder now if I'm talking about you. I wonder if the story of the prodigal son is your story. I wonder if you have rebelled against God and I'm talking about Christian people rebelling against God.

I wonder if you, brother in Christ, you sister in Christ, if you have rebelled against God and you have taken your journey and now you're down in the far country and you are far from God. And oh how far away that young man was and how very low he sank. You remember that he spent all the money and when all the money was gone all of his friends were gone as well and now he's reduced to this terrible way of living.

He's reduced to just feeding swine and there in the muck and the mire of the pig pit he begins to think about his position, about his situation. I remember reading commentary by a friend of mine, Michael Bentley, commentary on the gospel of Luke and Michael Bentley says there in that 15th chapter of Luke's gospel, there's always hope for a man when he begins to think again. And the prodigal son began to think again and he realized that his father had plenty, not only for his son, the elder brother who was still there, but for all of his servants.

And the prodigal son said, this is what I'm going to do. I've spent too much time living like this. I'm going to get up and I'm going to go home and I'm going to say, Father, I have sinned.

I have sinned against you and against heaven and I'm no longer worthy to be called your son, just make me one of your hired servants. And you know how the story ends and oh, I hope you can, you will listen to this. The story ends with young man making his way home and while he's still far off, his father sees him and runs to him and receives him with an abundant welcome.

He said, bring here a robe and put it around his shoulders, put shoes on his feet, put a ring on his finger and kill the fatted calf and let us eat and drink and be merry. I tell you, my friends, there's a message in that prodigal son for you. If you're a child of God today and this is your testimony, I once was living close to the Lord, but I have faltered and I have failed and I have strayed.

Listen, there's a way back. There's a way back. It's the way of repentance.

Abram was renewed in his faith when he went back to the land of Canaan, when he went back and when he worshiped again at the altar that he had built at the first and there's a way back for you today. You may say, Pastor, you don't know what I've done. I know the grace of God is greater than your sin.

I know there is such a thing as revival. I know there is such a thing as renewal and I know that God in his grace generously and kindly offers you that revival and that renewal if you will come back to the Father. And so I urge you today, brother in Christ, sister in Christ, if you're down in your faith, don't stay there.

Come home. Come home. Even as Abraham did and God's people said, let's bow together for prayer.

Father, we who know you as Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. First of all, thank you, O God, for showering your grace upon us in and through Christ Jesus. And Father, we know the truth about ourselves.

As Christians, we do okay for a while and then we get cold and indifferent and we stray. First thing we know, we find ourselves in the far country. Father, help us to learn today that there's a way home and that's the way of repentance.

Father, we pray that all of us here at Parkview Church who have allowed ourselves to get cold, who have allowed ourselves to falter in our faith, will by your grace find our way home this very day. And Father, speak a word to the heart of that one who has never come to faith in Christ. Help that person, Father, to understand that the one on his worst day is far, far better off than the unbeliever is on his best day.

And Lord, may that unbeliever come today receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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