

The Life of Abraham - Part 1

by W.F. Anderson

The sermon explores the life of Abraham, focusing on his faith, God's presence, and promises, and how these elements are essential for spiritual growth and development.

Scripture: Genesis 12:10

Topics: "Faith And Trust", "Gods Promises"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher begins by reading from Genesis chapter 12, where Abraham faces a severe famine in the land. As a result, Abraham decides to go down to Egypt to find food and shelter. However, he is concerned that the Egyptians will kill him in order to take his beautiful wife, Sarah. The preacher then digresses to share a personal anecdote about a vacation in Florida. The sermon concludes by emphasizing the importance of relying on God's promises and learning the implications of our faith, just as Abraham had to learn throughout his life.

Transcript

Mr. Vanderpoel took a little liberty. After what Mr. Willie said, I think that I should say a few words. Four years ago, we were coming up from Miami, and we were thinking of going to Fire the Palms, and I said, well, we'll just call in, and we won't make any definite arrangements.

We'll just see whether we think we'll like it or not. So I said, well, we'll maybe reserve a couple nights and just see. We did that, and when I went to the office, I met a lady that had such a smile on her face that I just said, well, we'll stay a week.

And we stayed a week. No, we didn't. We stayed a little longer than a week.

We just liked it so much. Well, the second year, we made reservations, and we came back. The third year, we brought some friends back.

And this is the fourth year. And every year, people say, where are you going this year? And I say, well, we're going back to Florida. And they say, well, how come you're going there? Don't you go anywhere else? And I say, well, every year, we like it better.

So thank you, folks. Shall we pray? Our Father, we thank Thee for this privilege to gather together this afternoon or this morning. We thank Thee for our Lord Jesus Christ, who has brought us together, for the privilege of remembering Him.

And we thank Thee that He loved us, that He died for us. And we thank Thee for the hope that we have in Him and all the blessings that we enjoy in Him. We thank Thee for this place, the friendship, the fellowship we've had together.

Now, as we think of this, the beginning of another week of conference, we pray for Thy servant, that he may be empowered from on high and that Thy word may be a real blessing to us. We pray for those who are in need, those who may be sick. Thou knowest their hearts.

We pray that they may be comforted, that all of us may realize that all things are in Thy hand, that nothing is impossible with Thee. We ask these things, giving thanks in our Savior's precious name. I suggested last night that I would like to take up some studies from the life of Abraham and also the life of Jacob.

I've purposely stayed away from the book of Exodus. My early years at Emmaus, I taught the book of Exodus, but I gave it up once I discovered that the students in secret had nicknamed me Pharaoh. So, I prefer the book of Genesis.

And I'd like to turn this morning to Genesis chapter 12 and skip over the better-known section of that chapter. We know the call of Abraham so well. I want to begin reading in verse 10.

I'm doing it for a second purpose, not only because we know the call of Abraham so well, but because biblical biographies are very, very realistic, and I like them. I find myself very depressed when I read most Christian biographies. The way they are written, the lives that are recounted must have been lived by archangels, not human beings.

They are unfortunately written by hero worshippers, and with a few exceptions, they just leave me totally depressed. There's no way I could live the way those biographies portray Christian heroes. I do not identify with those biographies, because the people are perfect, but I find it so refreshing to turn to biblical biographies, and I can identify with them because they are human beings, and their failures are recounted.

And what that tells me is that God does not discard us because we fail. It tells me that God works through failing human beings who have trusted him. And I like the biblical biographies, and that's why I've chosen to begin with this account of what really amounts to a failure on the part of Abraham.

Not that we're going to minimize Abraham's faith or point out his failures, but they are there, just as our own failures are there. So I want to begin reading this morning in Genesis chapter 12, with verse 10. And we'll read through chapter 13, verse 4. Now there was a famine in the land.

By the way, I'm reading from the Revised Standard Translation. You may find it a little bit different from the one you're reading. If it confuses you, I hope it won't, but if it does, it might be better just to listen.

Now there was a famine in the land, and so Abraham went down to Egypt to sojourn there. Well, the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai, his wife, I know that you are a woman beautiful to behold, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, this is his wife.

Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you. And that my life may be spared on your account.

When Abraham entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's

house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abraham.

And he had sheep, oxen, he asses, men servants, maid servants, she asses, and camels. But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abraham's wife. So Pharaoh called Abraham and said, What is this you've done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say she is my sister, so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife.

Take her and be gone. And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him on the way with his wife and all that he had. So Abraham went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and lot with him into the Negev.

Now Abraham was very rich in cattle, in silver and in gold. And as he journeyed on from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abraham called on the name of the Lord.

The spiritual pilgrimage of one of the greatest men in Scripture began as an insignificant part of a migratory movement. In the 21st and 20th centuries before Christ, peoples from the Near East were migrating all over the then known world. And Abraham and his father and the rest of the household were simply part of that great migratory stream that changed the political and cultural face of the Near East.

If men had been writing history books in the 21st century before Christ, the name of Abraham would never have appeared. But Abraham, that insignificant man, with this small family group that would have not made a dent in the history of the Near East, was moving in obedience to the call of God. And he, not those great migratory streams, changed the face of world history.

He had heard the call of God, as Stephen tells us in Acts chapter 7, in Ur of the Chaldees. Archaeologists tell us that Ur of the Chaldees was the greatest city in the Near East in its day, had never been surpassed, a great cultural and commercial center between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, a great religious center with its established priesthood and its worship of the moon god. That was no place for the revelation of God to take root and grow and a new nation to be formed.

And God had to get Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees. Stephen makes the interesting comment that it was the God of glory that appeared to our father Abraham. And what separated Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees was not the threat of judgment.

That would come. And in the 20th century before Christ, the Elamites would overrun the city and it would never again achieve the glory it had when Abraham was a resident there. But it was not the threat of judgment that moved Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees.

It was the promise of glory. Maybe we go at things the wrong way. I don't know.

But I remember a word in Paul's letter to the Romans. It's the goodness of God that leads you to repentance. Not primarily the threat of judgment, though that has its place, but it's the goodness of God that leads you to repentance.

And it was the revelation of a God of glory that separated Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees. And in one moment, the glory of Ur paled into insignificance and Abraham had caught a glimpse of what was eternal. And that was to be his guiding star for the rest of his days.

He had caught a glimpse of the eternal. And when he came into the land of promise, as all of you know, God made a covenant with him in the early verses of chapter 12. It's the foundation for God's dealings with the world ever after.

And I don't want to take up that great covenant, but most of the promises would be fulfilled past Abraham's lifetime. He wouldn't see any of them fulfilled in his own lifetime. But he had glimpsed the God of glory.

And that was enough. And during those years of wandering in the land of Palestine, he would own nothing but a cemetery. Everything was to be fulfilled beyond his own time and his descendants and on into eternity.

But God gave Abraham two things. God gave Abraham his presence and his promises. And that's all Abraham needed.

God has given us the same two things, his presence and his promises. Now, let's distinguish between God's presence and our awareness of his presence. God has not promised us an awareness of his presence.

He has promised us his presence. If he gives us an awareness of it, so much the better. But let's not confuse an awareness of his presence with his presence.

Far better to have the reality of his presence, whether we're aware of it or not, than to have some emotional experience divorced from his presence. He has already told us, I will never leave thee nor forsake thee. Now, we are not always aware of that.

I don't sense his presence. I don't really need that. What I need is his presence.

I don't really need the awareness of it. But I cannot live without him. Our Lord has told us that.

Without me, ye can do nothing. But he has promised never to leave us nor to forsake us. And it may be that in our difficulties, when he withdraws the sense of his presence, and we must depend on the reality of his presence, that we make our greatest spiritual progress.

He did not promise Abraham an awareness of his presence. The Mount of Transfiguration was unique in the experience of the disciples, and it was never repeated. There was no way they could stay on the Mount of Transfiguration and continually see the revelation of the glory of Jesus Christ.

They saw it once and that was enough. We simply couldn't stand the emotional strain to begin with of that kind of an experience repeated. But they would never forget what they had seen.

And Peter builds on that, as you remember, when he talks about the future coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw his glory. So we cannot have those mountaintop experiences all the time.

We couldn't stand it to begin with. But it's enough that he's here, whether we sense it or not. We live in the realization that he is here.

That he is with us. And in the hours of darkness that come to all of us, whether we are aware of his presence or not, we are able to live because he is there. The second thing that God gave to Abraham was his promises.

Most of which, again, were to be fulfilled far beyond Abraham's lifetime. The writer of the Hebrews, in talking about those patriarchs, says they did not receive the promises. They didn't receive the fulfillment of them.

And the writer of the Hebrews also tells us that Abraham looked for a city which had foundations, whose builder and maker is God. And what kept Abraham going during all those long years of pilgrimage in the land of Palestine? Not only the presence of God, but the promises of God. Most of God's promises to us have to do with realities that are beyond our own lifetime.

Some of us may live to the coming of Jesus Christ. We may not. That's not important.

The reality of his promises is important. Now, when God has promised the future, far beyond our own lifetime and on into eternity, let me suggest to you he has not given us those promises primarily so that we can lay out a detailed chart of the future. So that we can break the book of Revelation up, for instance, into its proper sequence of events, and we know exactly what's going to follow what.

That really, in my judgment, isn't important. The book of Revelation came to a persecuted church to nerve it to remain faithful unto death in the conviction that though it were beyond their lifetime, and in the conviction, Jesus Christ would ultimately rule as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And I still think, as others have pointed out, the key to the book of Revelation is in the vision John gets when he weeps that no one is worthy to take the scroll and break the seal.

And he hears the voice, the Lion of the tribe of Judah hath prevailed. And he turns and sees a Lamb, not a lion. That Lamb is the Lion.

And the way he got to be the Lion was by being the Lamb first. How did our Lord Jesus win the right to open the seals on that scroll? By going down into death and defeat. And that's the message of the book of Revelation.

You follow in the steps of the Lord Jesus, and he won the cross, the crown by the cross. And that message came to a persecuted church in the first century when it seemed that the power of Rome marshaled against God's people would utterly wipe out the people of God. What weapons did the church have Did they marshal legions to fight the legions of Rome? No.

What weapons did they have? Their lives, which they laid down for the sake of Jesus Christ. And what happened when the Roman Empire had been swept from the scene of history? The church of Jesus Christ was still going on. How did they win the victory? The way he won it.

By submitting to defeat and death. And that's why God has given us the promises. It is worthwhile because of that glorious future he has for us.

Those promises in the Old Testament, the future glory for the nation of Israel so often came to a people who had been beaten, killed, and the remnants scattered in Gentile countries. What kept them from turning to idolatry? What kept them from saying that God Marduk of the Babylonians was greater than God Jehovah of Israel? Those prophetic messages of future glory. God is not through with you yet.

And they were given to produce moral change in the lives of God's people. Now Peter tells us that. That these exceeding great and precious promises were given to us so that we might escape the corruption that is in the world through lust and become partakers of the divine nature.

Now that's all future. That's all in the process. Note the word might, so that we might.

It's the process going on. What keeps us? What keeps the people of God from settling down to a non-Christian pagan way of life whose values are totally temporal? And what keeps persecuted Christians in other countries from giving up Christianity, what it may mean in their life, to remain loyal to Jesus Christ? God's promise. God's promises.

What kept Abram going? God's promises. Not that they would be fulfilled in his lifetime, but he was convinced that the God of glory was the God of truth, and he would do what he said. And God has given us the same two things, his promise and his presence.

But with all that, Abram's faith is tested, as it always is. And I'm not sure this is the first test. It may have been the years of waiting at Haran until his father died was the first test of Abram's faith.

I don't know. It's a difficult thing to be delayed and still to keep the vision. But he got the vision down in Ur of the Chaldeans, and now there's a long delay.

And that may have been the first test. I don't know. But here's a test of his faith.

The famine comes into the land of promise, a land that later on God would describe to the people of Israel as a land flowing with milk and honey. And there's a famine comes. This is the land to which God led this man.

This was the goal when he called him way back in Ur of the Chaldeans. This is the land. He's here now, and what happens when he gets there? A famine.

A famine in the land of promise? Yes. Famine in the land of promise. Doesn't seem right, does it? But we have to remember two things.

One, we are still part of a sin-cursed earth, and while God sends his rain and his sun upon the just and the unjust, natural catastrophes also occur upon the just as well as the unjust. One of the things he has not promised us is exemption from the normal trials of everyday life. He has not promised us exemption from that.

I sometimes think he should. After all, we're such faithful servants. If he doesn't treat us better than the rest of the world around us, there's something wrong.

He's not being fair. Look how faithful we've been to him. Surely I deserve something for that.

Until I remember the word the Lord taught his disciples that when you've done everything that's commanded, you say we are unprofitable servants. We've only done our duty. But I don't think that way.

The way I think is, look, I've left here of the Chaldeans. I've made that thousand-mile journey. I've come down to a land I never heard of.

I've been obedient to your word. You ought to treat me better than to put me here in the middle of a famine. But God does not exempt us from the sufferings of a human race living in a world cursed because of sin.

He doesn't promise us any exemption. The second thing we have to remember is that we live, as we ourselves know ourselves to be, but we live among sinful human beings. And we suffer because of the sinful decisions that other people make.

It's always been the history of man. It's in the Scriptures. The innocent so often suffer because of the sinful decisions of other people as well as our own sinful decisions.

And we are not exempt from that. The godly in Jerusalem felt the famine when the Babylonians besieged them. They escaped with their lives, but they didn't escape without suffering.

Had they rebelled against God? No. Had they rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar? No. But they suffered along with those who had.

And Abram is not exempt from famine in the land of promise. I don't like that. I don't like to think that in the life of God's child there comes that kind of suffering, the kind one sees in the world around and sometimes even more so in the life of the believer.

My idea is God ought to exempt us from that. And yet I remember something that C.S. Lewis wrote in his book *The Problem of Pain*. That God is more concerned that we be good than that we be happy.

God really doesn't care whether we're happy or not. That's not important. What God does care is that we become holy.

And if happiness stands in the way of holiness, goodbye happiness. Because God has his priorities straight. We don't.

But God does. And fortunately he does. And as C.S. Lewis again says, God is determined to make us like his son regardless of the cost to him or to us.

I am caught up in the American pursuit of happiness. It's one of our inalienable rights written into the foundation of our country, the pursuit of happiness. I'm not sure we mean by happiness what the founding fathers understood by it when they wrote that statement, but there it is.

And we've been madly pursuing happiness ever since. And we think it's our right to be happy. It isn't.

As Christians, it's our right to be good, not to be happy. And God hasn't promised that we're going to be happy, but he has promised we're going to be good. And he's going to make us holy.

He's going to make us like his son. But he said nothing about our being happy in the process. Now again, let's not confuse happiness with joy.

Happiness is our response to circumstances, our reaction to what happens. And when what happens to us pleases us, we're happy. When what happens to us doesn't please us, when it hurts, we're unhappy.

Joy has nothing to do with our circumstances. Joy is a sense of well-being that's within that comes from a right relationship with God. And no circumstances can touch our right relationship to God in that sense of well-being.

At least they shouldn't. So we may not be happy. God never promised us happiness.

So famine comes into the land of promise when Abram gets there. And his solution was a very natural one. There are records from ancient Egypt of people coming from the Near East in times of famine down to Egypt to buy grain.

Records of the frontier guards admitting so many Semites or so many other people with their family in times of famine. Isaac later on would try the same thing. And it was God's provision for Jacob and his family.

Years later, they should go to Egypt in a time of famine in the Near East. Because Egypt didn't depend on rain. It was the annual overflow of the Nile that watered the fertile fields, the green strip up and down each side of the Nile River.

It didn't depend on rainfall. So when rain failed in the Near East, Egypt still had the water and the fertile land and the corn and the grain and everything people needed. And there were great migrations into Egypt during those times of famine.

And it was a natural thing for Abram to turn to Egypt. Now I'm not sure he was wrong, but it does interest me the contrast between verses 4 and 10 of our chapter. In verse 4 of chapter 12, we read that Abraham went as the Lord commanded.

In verse 10, it simply says, Abram went. Now I'm not going to imply that he was disobedient, but I wonder, particularly with the climax in chapter 13, verse 4, if Abraham made his decision, which was a natural decision, and in all likelihood a wise one, but if he made it without consulting God. Now I want to say two things about this and we'll have to pick up from here tonight.

God's guidance is rarely overt. It's a rare thing that I am aware of His guidance. That's the rare thing.

We want to make it the norm, but as you read through the Scriptures and the lives of the apostles, for instance, it was the rare thing, not the normal thing. Normally we have to weigh and evaluate our circumstances in the light of Biblical principles and make our decision, trusting that God is in it, because He's promised to be there. It does not free us from mistakes.

We'd like to be free of mistakes, but the one thing about God is He doesn't get all excited about our mistakes. It's a bad father that gets all excited about his children's mistakes. It's a bad father that doesn't see that as a learning process and encourages children.

And God isn't a bad father. And He doesn't get all upset over our normal mistakes. What does upset Him is disobedience.

And that's what upsets a normal human father, is disobedience, but not mistakes. And I'm not saying Abraham made a mistake, but we do, because God's guidance is not always overt, that we are aware of it. We simply trust God.

And on the basis of the principles that He has given us in His Word, we weigh and evaluate and make our decisions and go ahead. It may be in this case that Abraham did not consult God, made a normal, common-sense, everyday decision that was conditioned by his culture. This is what the people all around him did in such an emergency.

They went down to Egypt to get bread. And Abraham joined them and went to Egypt to have his needs met. There's one other thing I think that Abraham would have to learn, or maybe I should say, the second thing I want to talk about about his decision to go.

Working out the implications of God's promises in our own lifetime is a long process. Later on, Abraham could see in his own life, and in the life of Isaac, the implication of the promises of chapter 12. He was not at that point yet, but he'd get there.

None of us is born with perfect faith. And over the period of a lifetime, we are learning to work out the implications of God's promises in our own lives. But God is also a patient teacher.

He's not impatient like us human teachers. You dummy, I told you that yesterday. Didn't you learn it? God doesn't do that.

And he patiently works with his children as they learn the implication of God's promises for their own lives. Abraham still had to learn that. He was just working at it.

And so he goes down to Egypt. But even in the land of promise, as Israel forgot centuries later, man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. And even in the land of promise, his food and his clothing had to come from God, not from the land.

A warning God gave to Israel in Deuteronomy chapter 8, words repeated by our Lord Jesus, man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. So if we are learning the implications of our faith, the implications of God's promise, good. Good.

Let's keep learning those lessons. Abraham would learn them to the end of his life. Let's keep learning those lessons.

And let's learn what it is to trust God whether we sense His presence or not, whether we are aware of His guidance or not, whether we see the light in our darkness or not, we trust God. Maybe for some of us we have to go back to the cross, go back to the basics, go back to the first evidence of God's love for us in giving His Son, and begin there all over again in learning to trust Him. I trusted Him then.

What other evidence do I need to trust Him and be the true children of Abraham, the children of faith? Let's pray. Oh Father, there's something inside us that turns, that quivers as we think of suffering and trial and we don't like it and we don't want it. But it comes to all of us.

Children of promise. Children of faith. Children of Abraham.

It comes to all of us. Help us in those hours to trust the God we met in the light, to cast ourselves unreservedly upon You and not upon human resources that You may or may not use. Help us to cast ourselves on You.

If You use Egypt, fine. But keep us from trusting Egypt. Help us to trust the God of glory.

We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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