

The Journey of Faith
Go West - the call of Abraham
Genesis 11:26-12:9 1st May 2022
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Introduction: Two sides to our Christian life

The Christian life is like a coin: one coin, two sides: there is the life we live together, in the church, and then there is our individual walk with the Lord, all on our own, when you or I speak to him, hear his voice, and obey. No-one can walk this second journey with us. No one can climb the highest mountains, or travel through the darkest valleys of spiritual experience.

This term, we're thinking together about our individual walk with God, your walk, my walk, as we turn to the life of Abraham.

And today we begin where every believer's journey begins—when God calls us. If you are a believer, there was a moment, remembered or forgotten; when you were young or when you were older; instantaneous or dawning over a span of time; when you heard God's call and obeyed. No-one, is born a Christian! We begin our journey when, as the apostle Peter puts it, God calls us “out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9). Let's learn together from Abraham's call, that....

#1 The call of God comes out of the blue

Abraham and his family lived in Ur of the Chaldeans, which is in present day Iraq, some 4000 years ago. Ur was a large and sophisticated city, the New York or London of its day, with an enormous skyscraper ziggurat on its skyline—some 100 feet tall.

At the top of the ziggurat was a shrine dedicated to the moon god Nannar and at the base of the ziggurat was a temple dedicated to his consort, the moon goddess Ningal. Ur was a city given up to idolatry. A large part of its business and economy was dedicated to the worship of false gods: the manufacture of idol figurines and merchandise, the preparation of food to offer to the gods, and so on. Every day of his life, Abraham would have seen this ziggurat on the horizon. (In the Gulf War of 1990-1991 you may remember that American soldiers climbed the steps and drove their tanks around this ziggurat. Ur's monument to idolatry is still standing.)

And we read in Joshua 24:15 that Abraham and his family worshipped these false gods. But one day, when Abraham was going about his daily business at the age of 75 (which was about midlife in those days), the God of glory appeared to him (12:1). God's call often comes out of the blue, when we're not expecting it.

2000 years after Abraham's call, Peter and Andrew were throwing their fishermen nets into the sea of Galilee, as they had been doing every other day of their adult lives, when they heard Jesus say—exactly the same thing as Abraham heard “Come follow me.” (Matthew 4:19) And one day when Saul was on his way to Damascus, Jesus called him, all of a sudden.

Moving on another 2000 years, God often calls people out of the blue, when they are least expecting it! God may choose to call someone today, through this sermon!

#2 The call of God is a call to leave idolatry

Secondly, when God calls us he calls us to leave behind our lives of idolatry. People in the West tend to think that idolatry belongs to other distant cultures, they find it hard to believe that people living in England might worship idols! But according to Scripture, the whole world outside of Christ, worships idols.

An idol is any thing or anyone we love or prize more than God. An idol is any thing or anyone we turn to when we are sad, trouble or in need of comfort instead of God. Our culture is filled with the idols of pleasure, education, health, possessions, money, houses, holidays, families, sport, hobbies, entertainment and so on.

Have you seen what's happening to the high streets of our towns and villages? Gone are the newspaper shops and food shops and electrical appliance shops, and in their place are nail parlours, tattoo shops, tanning studios, barbers and gyms! The human body is a modern idol! People are consumed with their looks, no doubt driven by trends that surge through social media. The body has become a modern idol.

Brothers and sisters, we're to look after our bodies for they are temples of the Holy Spirit, but these ones are dying, and we're looking forward to a new glorious body in the world to come. Let's not waste too much money on these present ones!

Idols are all around us!

And one day, just as it was with Abraham, the true and living glorious God calls us to leave the world of powerless dead idols.

Are we continually leaving idols behind, brothers and sisters? The human heart is an idol factory, constantly needing its compass turned away from idols and towards Jesus Christ, again.

#3 The call of God is costly

Thirdly, we should notice that the call of God is costly, “Leave your country, your people, and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.”

(1) Leave behind the country— that means leave behind your culture with all of its idolatry and sin.

(2) Leave behind your people? Our unbelieving friends, well that is much more difficult. But we cannot love the world and love God; our new community must become the people of God: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Therefore come out from them and be separate” (2 Corinthians 6)

(3) Leave behind your father’s household—ouch! From now on, I am to be the first in your life. Jesus said: “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” (Matthew 10:37)

Perhaps you’ve come to realise this, that you love God more than your nearest and dearest. We’re called to care for our relatives, but they are no longer the first in our hearts. The call of God is costly! And not only in what Abraham had to leave behind, but where he was called to go! “Go to the land I will show you!” I can imagine Abraham asking God, “Can I have just a few more details about the destination? Is it warm or cold, is it flat or hilly?” But all God says, summarise, “Go west!”

Abraham's call was costly! And it is no different today.

Luke chapter 9: Jesus said to another man, “Follow me.” But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.” Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

Jesus said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23)

Jesus saw James and John. “They were in a boat with their father Zebedee preparing their nets. Jesus called them and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.” (Matt 4:21-22)

Jesus met a man who loved his money more than he loved God—money was therefore his idol. Did Jesus tone it down to get a new recruit? “Sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. When the man heard this, he became very sad because he was a man of great wealth.” (Luke 18)

The fact that God’s call is costly, may, paradoxically, be the source of real comfort to some believer listening to me today. Because you are finding the Christian life costly, and you are wondering if something is wrong. Nothing is wrong! You’re on the right track!

#4 The call of God comes with wonderful promises

But costliness is only half the story, because the call of God comes with wonderful promises! 12:2. Seven blessings—not all of them applicable to us:

1. Into a Great Nation - Abraham was the first “Israelite”, the father of the nation of Israel
2. I will bless you - a wide word, my favour and smile will be upon you
3. I will make your name great - Abraham became a famous man, who hasn’t heard of him?
4. You will be a blessing - other people are going to get blessed through you
5. I will bless those who bless you ..
6. ..and curse those who curse you—because God was tying his name and honour to

Abraham, to touch Abraham—for good or evil, was to touch God himself. Protection!
7. All people will be blessed through you! The Messiah, Jesus Christ would be born out
Israel, the nation which came from Abraham!

The call of God comes with mighty promises! If you obey God's call, he promises every spiritual blessing! God does not promise wealth, God does not promise good health, God does not promise popularity or fame. But he does promise spiritual blessings:

For the man who had to “sell everything and give to the poor” Jesus promised “and you will have treasure in heaven.” (Luke 18)

For those who may lose loved ones for the Gospel's sake, Jesus promises, “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.” (Matthew 19)

For everyone who gives up ungodly friends, God promises a new family: “Therefore come out from them and be separate... and I will be Father to you and you will be my sons and daughters says the Lord almighty.” (2 Corinthians 6)

Treasures in heaven, a hundred times more than what we lose, eternal life, a new family! There is a cost to pay, but the blessings far outweigh the losses! “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.” (Ephesians 1:3)

“For my own part” said missionary David Livingstone, “I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to be a missionary. People talk of the sacrifices I have made....Away with the word sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in and for us. I never made a sacrifice.”

#5 God's call is obeyed by the gift of faith

Abraham heard the call of God and he obeyed. 12:4.

What made Abraham obey? What drove him? What persuaded him? Abraham “goes because, in his heart he is an ambitious man with a desire for greatness...” suggested one blind author. Abraham obeyed God because God promised he’d have more Instagram followers than Ronaldo. No, the reason, the motivation, the power to obey the call of God came from faith, “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance obeyed and went...” (Heb 11:8). The moment God calls us he gives us the precious gift of faith—a supernatural trust in the true and living God. Abraham, had the promises, but he did not know whether any of them would come true! And many of them did not come true in his own lifetime! What drove him to obey the call was trust in the God who made the promises, and that trust or faith is a gift. “I trust this God, I will follow Him.”

Three exhortations

Don't let your family hold you back!

I haven't told you the whole story of Genesis 11 and 12. God called Abraham to leave his family behind in Ur of the Chaldean, but he didn't. He took most of them with him. (Oh it says in chapter 11:31 that Terah led the party out of Ur, but in a patriarchy the oldest man is always called the leader even if it was his son that was the driver!)

Somehow dad Terah managed to tag along with Abraham. When they all got to Haran they settled there (11:31). But Haran was only half way to Canaan! What are you doing Abraham? Keep on going brother!

While Abraham was in half-way Haran he built no altars and enjoyed no appearances of the Lord. Abraham only completed his obedience and left Haran after his father had died, Acts 7: 4.

It seems very likely that Terah, still an idol worshipper—the moon-god was also worshipped in Haran - held Abraham back. And only once free of his pagan father did Abraham's obedience flourish again. The Lord appears to him at Shechem, verse 7 with new promises, and he built an altar to the Lord at Bethel.

We are called to love and care for our nearest and dearest but our families are never to slow us down spiritually. Don't let your family hold you back spiritually. You apply it to your life and circumstances. The Lord will help you.

I have decided to follow Jesus.

Though none go with me

I still will follow.

Is God calling you?

The second lesson is a question. Is God calling you to some ministry? Is God calling someone here to be a missionary? An evangelist? A pastor? Some act of obedience? And you are ignoring it? Answer his call today and see what blessings flow!

God is calling you!

And finally, for those who have not yet begun the journey— God is calling you today. Jesus says to you: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matt 11)

May we hear the call of God, and may God give us the gift of faith so that we might obey.

Some suggested questions to ponder

1. How do I know when a good gift of God is drifting in my life towards becoming an idol?
2. Discuss some modern idols: sport, hobbies, wealth, etc. Especially explore the idol of the human body. How has this become an idol today?
3. Can we share our stories of how God called us, and when?
4. Why do you think there were no fresh appearances of God in Haran and no altars there either? Why fresh appearances in Canaan?
5. In what ways can our obedience be partial?
6. What exactly is faith and why is it so powerful?
7. What has God spoken to you about through this sermon?