

# Abraham and the Life of Faith

## “The First Step”

*“So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.”*  
Genesis 12:4

Sunday, April 26  
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Some of you may remember that muggy July evening when the world was glued to radio and television to hear Neil Armstrong take the first steps on the surface of the moon. Do you remember going outdoors and staring at the moon that evening, in amazement that there really was a man on the moon? It was quite a feat. Especially when you consider the Saturn V launched from the Earth, which spins at 1,000mph while orbiting the sun, which is flying through space at 514,000mph, to hit a target, the moon, which zooms around the Earth at over 2,000mph. Think for a moment of all the necessary calculations that went into making sure Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins and Buzz Aldrin hit the target. Lucky for them it wasn't me calculating the flight plan, otherwise they would be out there still with Dr. Smith and Will Robinson. Risky business indeed.

What if we had never tried? What if we'd been just content to look at the moon from a distance? But we weren't. Man decided that the risk was worth it, and so he launched himself out into the vacuum of space, and he continues to do so today. Our story today addresses another risky journey. Risk is never easy – and it certainly isn't for the faint of heart. One of my favorite quotes comes I think from G.K. Chesterton, who once quipped: Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been tried and found hard. There is a risk to stepping out in faith, but the rewards are infinitely greater than the risk of going to the moon. When we embark on the Christian journey—what was once called “The Way”—our goal is higher and its impact potentially more wide reaching than any benefit that comes from man's accomplishments.

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G.K. Chesterton

We begin to see this in the life of Abram. Genesis 12:1-9 reveals to us that the call of God comes with a promise to those who respond in faith. The call comes in Genesis to the most unlikely of characters. Last we heard of Abram, this family was overcome by baronness and death. And then came the call.

### The Call

***<sup>1</sup>The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.***

Genesis 11 ended in barrenness and death. But note, The Lord *'had said'* to Abram. We are never told when it was that God spoke first to Abram, nor given any details as to how Abram even knew who God was. Yes, there are some who speculate that he received instructions from Seth or another from that godly line, or even from Job, but we have no way of knowing. Abram did not have the advantage of a Moses, who could look back to the history of the tribes of Israel, nor a Samuel who had an Eli to give guidance. Abram didn't have Gideon's benefits of history known, nor are we given details of a theophany like that of Manoah, the father of Samson. He certainly didn't have God in the flesh taking a fishing trip alongside of him. Yet somehow, in some way, Abram heard the call of God.

The call came in the form of a command, “Go...” He was ordered to leave behind everything that in that time would have been the very things one would depend upon for life, for security, and any chance of prosperity. To leave his country (big picture) his

people (more focused picture) and his father's household (pretty laser focused picture) would be to place himself wholly into the hands of this God who was now calling him. Abram would be the first to receive such a call, but he wouldn't be the last. Someone has said, "Abraham's obedience to the divine call, forsaking his homeland and family for the worship of the LORD in the land of promise, stands as an example and an incentive to all his descendants who will follow suit."<sup>1</sup>

We hear the call echoed in the words of Jesus to the young rich man: "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."<sup>a</sup> We see the call displayed in the actions of the early church: "Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need."<sup>b</sup> To not answer the call leaves us to fill that place in our lives, our hearts and our souls which God has created to filled by Him. We are left with a void; a hunger that can never be satisfied; a thirst that cannot be quenched. Sure, we can find all manner of things that provide momentary solace, but inevitably we find nothing can scratch the itch introduced by the prompting from the Lord. As an old Bible teacher wrote: "Each step of real advance in the Divine life will involve an altar on which some dear fragment of the self-life has been offered; or a cairn beneath which some cherished idol has been buried."<sup>2</sup>

To not answer the call is to remain in Ur, or perhaps, to settle in Haran—to stop short of the place to which God desires to lead us. To become amused in the proverbial mud puddle rather than frolic in the ocean. Someone has said that the whole Abrahamic narrative is premised on this seeming contradiction: "To stay in safety is to remain barren; to leave in risk is to have hope."<sup>3</sup>

The call here, as is it is in our lives, is a call to step out in faith. To leave what the world values and cherishes and values above all else behind, and place our very lives in the hands of God. It is such a radical departure that Jesus describes it:

"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Matthew 10:37-39<sup>c</sup>

For a number of years as I wrestled with the call of God in my own life. Living in Brampton I could step out on my front porch and see the back porch of my younger sister's home. From her front porch see could see the front porch of our older sister's home. In the mornings all our children (seven of them) would congregate at the same school bus stop. My parents lived in Brampton and we all attended the same Corps. We were a close-knit family. And I was being called to leave and go. Now, the call is not always to full-time ministry. Perhaps the call is becoming a disciple of Jesus, not just a fan. The call might be to teach Sunday School; to lead a Bible study; to be a local officer (elder); to become the spiritual head of the family or take on mentoring a newborn Christian. The call comes in many ways and to many avenues of service. But

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<sup>a</sup> Mark 10:21

<sup>b</sup> Acts 2:45

<sup>c</sup> See also Luke 17:33; John 12:25

the call *does* come, and while it may not always tell you exactly where you are to go, it will be accompanied by a promise.

### The Promise

***<sup>2</sup>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.***

***<sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;***

***and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you.”***

God was going to do for Abram what the builders of Babel were attempting to do for themselves. “The great name will be a gift, not an accomplishment.”<sup>4</sup> The promise is for something far greater, for more far reaching, than anything Abram, or the builders of Babel could have imagined. And remember, this family line is barren, it has come to nothing. Ephesians 3:20, *“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us...”* is more than a nice benediction ending a worship service; it is a declaration of faith in the promise and faithfulness of God. They are words anticipating the glory awaiting us as we follow where God is leading.

The great name  
will be a gift, not  
an  
accomplishment

Victor P Hamilton

The promise to Abram is more than a personal blessing, it is universal. It is going to be through Abram and his obedience to the call, that God is going to pour out His blessing on the world. The promise to Abram alludes to the promise of Jesus and the church. That one day a man would be perfectly obedient and through Him a people would come who would spread the news of God’s love to the ends of the world. The commands to Abram to “leave” and “go” are echoed in the Great Commission, “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”<sup>d</sup>

In the Law given Moses and the prayer of Solomon, we see that the purpose of God’s people was to be a beacon to the world to God’s grace and love, to make a declaration of the Great Name that others may come and seek. In Solomon’s prayer of dedication regarding the temple he prayed:

As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name— for men will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.

1 Kings 8:41-43

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<sup>d</sup> Matthew 28:19-20

It is not an accident that God planted His chosen people on a stretch of highly valuable real estate through which highways linking east and western empires and merchant caravans would travel. The whole world could witness God's blessing upon his people, and through that they would come to know the one true God.

Today it is through us, those who were not a people who have been made a royal priesthood a holy nation, a people belonging to God that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of Ur and Haran, to go and preach the gospel. Jesus would cast his church in the image of a city on a hill that cannot be hidden, and like salt which permeates, purifies and preserves that into which it is poured. The blessing in both cases is dependent upon obedience. To remain in Ur or to settle in Haran, is to forfeit the blessing. Scripture tells us that "those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs."<sup>e</sup>

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

Jonah 2:8

For the next several weeks Major Laurie and several other officers will once more obey the call of God (mediated through Divisional and Territorial Headquarters), and will leave their homes and their people to become a blessing to the residents and staff of Meighen Health Centre, which is enduring an outbreak of Wuhan Flu. And while you may not be called to be a blessing in the same way, God has placed you where He can make you a blessing, if you are obedient (and even if not, He can still use you). It may be in your family, in a classroom, in a workplace, in your neighborhood. Though God can use you no matter where you are, even if in disobedience to the call, you will never come to know the fullness of God's blessing.

You see, there will always be a response to the call. That response is either to obey or to disobey. To obey is to do as Abram – to step out in faith and go where God leads, do what God commands, to be what call us to be. Any other response to that is disobedience. To say "Later," is just as disobedient as saying, "No". The response of Abram, to obey the call launched him into the pilgrim life. His journey, began here and extending until his death, is a portrait of the life of faith. It is no accident that Abram spent his entire life with God living in a tent.

### The Response

***<sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. <sup>5</sup> He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring[c] I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him.***

***<sup>8</sup> 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.***

***<sup>9</sup> Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.***

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<sup>e</sup> Jonah 2:8

“So Abram went as the Lord told him...” Don’t let those words fall to the floor without appreciating how profound it was that Abram obeyed. However, note too that his obedience was not complete. First, the call originally had been to leave everything in Ur, but we know that at least Terah and the Lot had joined him on the trip to Haran, and then they had settled there. That wasn’t what God had commanded. And so, some time later, perhaps with the arrival in Haran of his brother Nahor, or it was the death of his father, Abram finally began the last leg of the journey, but again, “Lot went with him.” It’s almost as if the writer wants us to be prepared for the fallout of dragging along that which God has commanded us to leave.

### Two important lessons

However, let me point out two big lessons from Abram’s response. First, there is what some call the ‘tent life’. Abram would live life as a pilgrim. He never built a city; never laid the foundation for a house; but moved from place to place, dwelling in a tent. The writer of Hebrews says of Abram and those who live the pilgrim life:

...they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Hebrews 11:13-16

Men of the world erect towers; pilgrims pitch tents.

A random thought

The pilgrim life recognizes that we are simply passing through, that this world is not our home. The pilgrim does not become overly attached to the things of this world, because his hope and faith are looking to another world. That doesn’t mean they become so heavenly minded they are of no earthly good. On the contrary, it is because they are heavenly minded that they *are* so good for the world— they are the channel through which God blesses the world. The pilgrim life also never settles for half-way.

The pilgrim is for ever seeking after God, desiring to know Him better and more deeply. The fourth Beatitude, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*”<sup>f</sup> does not speak of a static condition, but of a *dynamic* condition. That we are to *keep on* hungering and *keep on* thirsting because we will *keep on* being filled. The pilgrim on his journey always learns new names for God, that is, as they get to know Him better and have more experiences and encounters with God, they learn more about Him, and have to describe Him in new ways (El Elyon – God Most High; Adonai Yahweh – Sovereign Lord; El Shaddai – God Almighty; Yahweh Yir’eh – the Lord Provides). Our journey of faith should include not only becoming more knowledgeable mentally about God, but also more deeply in our hearts. We too should be finding new names for God, or at least finding examples of the Scriptural names being lived out in our lives, families and churches.

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<sup>f</sup> Matthew 5:6

That brings us to the second lesson – altar building. Each step along the pilgrim way, Abram builds an altar, a place to worship and praise God; a place which becomes a witness and therefore proclamation of faith in God. Young’s Literal Translation renders 12:8, “...and he buildeth there an altar to Jehovah, and preacheth in the name of Jehovah.” One of those places was at the “great tree of Moreh” (some say the terebinth, others the oak). Moreh means “teacher”, and it is likely that this tree was a place where Canaanites would come to engage in pagan rites. A large tree boasted of fertility, and we often hear God expressing displeasure at what takes place under every spreading tree. But right there, at a place of pagan worship, by building an altar, Abram declared that he and his family were not like the others, that they worshipped a different God than the others. Building that altar made the faith of Abram visible to the Canaanites.

Building an altar was also an act of remembrance. An altar is more enduring than just having dwelled there and then moved on. It was an ancient “Killroy was here.” Long after Abram departed the altar would stand as a witness to his God, a reminder to those who followed that a pilgrim had been there. We see Joshua building an altar by the Jordan, a reminder of the nation’s journey from Egypt. Later, the two tribes that took possession of the land east of the Jordan, built a cairn as a reminder to those living west of the Jordan that they were still one people. The modern cenotaph found in towns and cities across Canada, stands as constant reminder to later generations of lives of their forebears, and becomes a place to gather to remember them.

But there is another application of building an altar. I would like to think that as an officer I have built an altar in each of the Corps to which I have ministered –that is, that some enduring lesson or witness has left an impact long after I have left. That someone has come to know God better through my obedience to the call, and that in turn, they too are now building altars that will endure for the next generation, and the next. I’m sure you can think of altar builders in your life—an adult that came alongside with timely advice, a Sunday School teacher whose love made an impact in your youth, a youth group leader who gave of himself or herself, a bandmaster who was also a mentor. Then there are those altars built by a parent or grandparent that demonstrated that their faith was something very real and important.

Paul points to the altar building grandmother of Timothy: “I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.”<sup>9</sup> The question becomes, where are you building altars today? In whose life are you leaving a lasting impression and demonstration of your faith? If you have heard the call of God and responded in obedience, you are sure to be blessed and be a blessing. Of this you can be sure, God has called you out of Ur. He has called you to leave Haran.

## Conclusion

Late in the evening of Friday, March 7<sup>th</sup>, 12 crew members and 227 passengers from 14 different nations, boarded a Malaysian Airlines Boeing 777. At forty-two minutes after midnight they took off from Kuala Lumpur, and were never seen again. Every day, all

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Tim 1:5

around the world, people board airplanes piloted by people they've never met, built by people they've never known, loaded by people they only see through a tiny window and which are guided by people they will never see or hear. We board trains, buses, elevators or drive on highways at high speed surrounded by total strangers – and in doing so we place our lives into the hands of countless other fallen and fragile people. And the whole time we hardly give it second thought.

Why then is it so hard for us to place our lives in the hands of a loving God, who knows us better than we know ourselves, and who longs for a relationship with us. A God who promises to bless us and make us a blessing. Media today often highlights people who strive to change the world, but they more then often neglect the one way by which we can truly change the world: responding in faith to the call of God. Living the pilgrim life and building altars in the lives of others.

As we journey with Abram over the next several weeks, we will see a living portrait of our own journey of faith. It won't be a journey without detours; it won't be a journey without the occasional mishap; it won't be a journey without some hesitation. However, the journey of Abram will remind us of the faithfulness of God, and the risks that God is willing to take to see us complete our journey.

This past week the annual moves came out, a very real reminder to officers of the pilgrim life. For a group of cadets, the moves represent a new and exciting leg on their journey, and their opportunity to build altars, and take hold of their role in imparting the blessing of God in new communities. Thankfully, they have not stayed put in Ur, nor settled in Haran, but have stepped out in faith, trusting that God will journey alongside.

In 1969 Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon. Leaving the safety of solid ground and a life giving atmosphere, he and his comrades launched out on a risky venture to go where no one had gone before, and do what no one had ever done before. It was an amazing feat of engineering and mathematics. However, God has not called us to hit a moving target many thousands of miles away. Instead He calls us to step out in faith right where we are.

Very simply put, the choice is ours. What is your response to the call of God?

## Notes:

Gen 9:18, 25; 10:6, 15-20 remind us of the Canaanites descending from Ham. Apparently the apple still does not fall far from the tree, as we see the fallen image being passed on to succeeding generations

Gen 13:7 Canaanites in the land (see also 12:6)

### Meyer

- “Each step of real advance in the Divine life will involve an altar on which some dear fragment of our self-life has been offered; or a cairn beneath which some cherished idol has been buried.” (16)

### Edersheim

- Four fold command / four fold blessing
- See also Heb 11:8
- Still childless
- Enlarge Japhthah, dwell in Shems tents (Act 3:25; Gal 3:8-14)
- Supposed prominence of Damascus

### Wilmington

- “...preceding the time of Abraham, [Ur] was the most magnificent city in all the world; a centre of manufacturing, farming, and shipping, in a land of fabulous fertility and wealth, with caravans going in every direction to distant lands, and ships sailing from the docks of Ur down the Persian Gulf with cargoes of copper and hard stone.” (37)
- Haran was 700 miles north of Ur on a main caravan road connecting the cities of the east with Damascus and Egypt (37)

### Moore

- “called on the name of the Lord” a phrase used several times, beginning with the godly line of Seth (Gen 4:26), then Abram (Gen 12:8; 13:4; 21:33) or Isaac (Gen 26:25); Paul will describe Christians as “those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...” (1 Cor 1:2)
- They worshiped God through sacrifice and, prayer and song
- Unfolded before us is man repeatedly coming up with new names for God, that is, as they got to know Him better and had more experiences and encounters with God, they learned more about Him, and had to describe Him in new ways (El Elyon – God Most High<sup>h</sup>; Adonai Yahweh – Sovereign Lord<sup>i</sup>; El Shaddai – God Almighty<sup>j</sup>; Yahweh Yir’eh – the Lord Provides<sup>k</sup>)
- Our journey of faith should include not only becoming more knowledgeable mentally about God, but also more deeply in our hearts. We too should be finding new names for

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<sup>h</sup> Gen 14:22

<sup>i</sup> Gen 15:2

<sup>j</sup> Gen 17:1

<sup>k</sup> Gen 22:14

God, or at least finding examples of those Scriptural names being lived out in our lives, families and churches

- “calling on the name of the Lord” may also speak to proclamation
- One of the ways by which Abram would be a blessing was in building altars and calling upon God – that is, making his faith visible
- We see hints of this in his dealings with the king of Sodom (Gen 14:22); and the Philistine awareness of Abraham’s God (perhaps made known during Gen 21:33-34) even during the life of Isaac (Gen 26:25-28)

#### Wenham

- “Moreh” ...is literally “teacher,” which suggests it was a place where divine oracles could be obtained (279)
- Whereas some translate the Hebrew as ‘terebinth’ an oak, because of its greater height, would be a more desirable place for worship
- Verse 7 marks the first appearance of Yahweh to Abram<sup>1</sup> or any of the patriarchs
- Here too we have the first promise of offspring and also land (previously he was just going to “go to a place I will show you”). Here the place that he will be shown will be his offspring’s possession
- 12:1-13:18 portray Abram visiting the major sanctuaries of Canaan, Shechem, Bethel and Hebron (J.A. Emerton cited, 280)
- “...presumably only the altar building is mentioned here because it survived longer than the sacrifice as a witness to God’s promise and the patriarch’s response.” (280)
- Verse 9 brings to mind the staged journey of Israel in the wilderness, there is a commonality in the language that suggests a link
- “Abraham’s obedience to the divine call, forsaking his homeland and family for the worship of the LORD in the land of promise, stands as an example and an incentive to all his descendants who will follow suit.” (281)
- We see Abraham travel the entire length

#### Brueggeman

- The whole of the Abrahamic narrative is premised on this seeming contradiction: to stay in safety is to remain barren; to leave in risk is to have hope. (118) see Mark 8:35
- Theme of renunciation permeates the NT and the teaching of Christ
- All the striving of Babel is realized when we humble ourselves to the will of God
- The gospel of Luke grasping the Abrahamic blessing (Lk 1:46-55; 13:10-17; 16:19-31; 19:1-10)
- The rich young ruler could not ‘leave and go’
- The life of journey as a metaphor for faith

#### Hamilton

- “The great name will be a gift, not an achievement.” (372)

#### Social Distancing

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PoTdKqeG\\_s8&feature=youtu.be&mc\\_cid=8a277ec9b3&mc\\_eid=4b85b0967e](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PoTdKqeG_s8&feature=youtu.be&mc_cid=8a277ec9b3&mc_eid=4b85b0967e)

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 281.

<sup>2</sup> F.B. Meyer, *Abraham: The Obedience of Faith* (Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1960), 16.

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<sup>1</sup> See also 17:1; 18:1; 26:2, 24; 35:9; 48:3

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 118.

<sup>4</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 372.