

## “The Call To Pilgrimage”

I love the song “*Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah.*” It describes a life of faith as a pilgrimage, a journey taken for a spiritual purpose and involving personal transformation. In the Christian tradition, all of life is a pilgrimage. The song captures that imagery well.

In the 1600s, a Christian pastor named John Bunyan, While in prison, wrote what was to become one of the most influential books in Christian literature. The book is often called simply *The Pilgrims Progress*. The full title originally was, *The Pilgrim’s Progress, from this world to that which is to come: delivered under the similitude of a dream, wherein is discovered the matter of his getting out, his dangerous journey; and safe arrival at the desired country.* It has been translated into over 200 languages and has never been out of print. It is considered by some to be the first novel written in English. 1

On a more personal level when Connie and I were first getting to know each other our college had a food plan, so we decided to meet for breakfast each morning and read from *Pilgrim’s Progress*. I was 20 years old. She was 18. That was 50 years ago. I thought it might be funny to say, “*marrying my sister was the best decision I ever made.*” I wasn’t sure you would get the joke, so I decided not to use it. We had both begun a pilgrimage of faith. Our paths converged, and we began to walk together.

One thing we'll see in the story of Abraham is that the pilgrimage has many twists and turns. I was thinking about Barry and Lee Cooper beginning their first year with Barry as lead pastor. They remodeled his new office, and then the cancer diagnosis came. His first year as lead pastor has turned out differently than imagined. What about you? Have you experienced some twists and turns in the path of life? If you haven't, you almost certainly will. Scripture says we walk by faith and not by sight. How might thinking of your life as a pilgrimage of faith help you to live it more wisely - even more beautifully? Abraham is

mentioned over 300 times in the Bible. Many consider his story to be the first fully developed story of an individual person's life in all of known literature. And it is a pilgrimage of faith, a journey based on a promise and full of surprises. It is also full of lessons for you and me.

*One truth about our pilgrimage of faith is that it doesn't begin with us.*

## I. **GOD INITIATES THE PILGRIMAGE OF FAITH.**

**Genesis 12:1** *Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. God is the one who initiates the call. What I see in Abraham's story is what I experienced in my life and have seen in many others.*

### **A. God enters our stories in surprising ways.**

This comes through in the Scripture we read at the end of **Genesis 11**. Abram's family members all have names connected with the worship of the moon god. In a culture where names are significant, that is meaningful. Archeology has revealed that Ur and Haran, the two places connected to his family, were centers for the worship of the moon. The names Sarah and Milcah, in **Genesis 11:29**, have been identified with the wife of the moon god and her daughter. Later in the Bible, **Joshua 24:2**, says *Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.* Nothing in Abraham's religious or family background suggests he's just a likely candidate to be called out of false worship into true faith and relationship with the one true God. Over and over in Scripture, we are shown that God loves to work in mysterious and surprising ways! Have you seen that?

### **B. God's calling is surprising because it is the call of grace.**

Abraham is not called because he met some qualifications. God doesn't call you because you are qualified in some way. *You don't earn grace. You receive it.* **2 Timothy 1:9** speaks of God as the one *who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.* There is a beautiful, powerful

appropriate analogy between what God does with Abraham historically and what he does with each of us personally. Abram *becomes* an important person in the story of the Bible, but at this point, his story reminds me of what Paul wrote to the Corinthians. In **1 Corinthians 1:27-29**, He said, *God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;* <sup>28</sup> *God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,* <sup>29</sup> *so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.* When you read these stories in the Bible, if you see and believe this principle of grace, they can be both incredibly humbling and profoundly encouraging. *God comes surprising ways, his call is gracious and...*

### **C. God's calling imparts a new identity.**

From the moment that God entered his life, Abraham's identity at the most profound level was no longer going to be shaped by his past. It wouldn't be determined by his idol worshipping family of origin or his former place of residence but by his relationship with God.

Our culture seems to be struggling as never before with the issue of identity. People ask the question, *What do you identify as?* Listen, when God enters into your life, what matters most is what he says and who he says you are in your relationship with him. I was reading the testimony of a Christian author named Jackie Hill Perry. She wrote a book called *Gay Girl, Good God*. You have to pause when you mention the title of that book, or else it comes across wrong. She tells how the morning after she came to faith in Christ, she went online and changed her profile picture. She had a picture that strongly presented herself as a hyper-masculinized gay woman, and she knew that that was no longer who she was in the deepest part of her soul. She said she actually had to go back to her high school pictures and found a picture of her going to her high school prom. She posted that in her new profile picture. She was making a statement that she had a new identity and was on a new pilgrimage. It had all begun with the call of God and the grace of God. That realization doesn't always come so quickly or dramatically. But it is part of the call of God on us all.

*A sense of identity based on the grace of God and shaped by the call*

of God is essential to living this pilgrimage of faith. How much does that shape your core identity? When we sing the song, *Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land. I am weak, but Thou art mighty, hold me with thy powerful hand.* Take to heart that profound pilgrim identity, as one called by God and held by him.

#### **D. The call of God is the reason for our hope in the world.**

In **Genesis 1-11** after God creates a good world everything begins to fall apart. Adam and Eve believed the lie of the serpent, distrusted God and disobeyed him. Cain, their son, murders Abel, his brother. The world spirals into violence. God brings the cataclysmic judgment of the flood. The original sin reasserts itself in arrogant pride in the story of the tower of Babel. There was nothing promising in the way things seemed to be going! The historical background was not promising, and the personal circumstances of Abram were not promising.

**Genesis 11:30** adds an interesting, poignant personal note. It says, *now Sarai was barren; she had no child.* Walter Brueggemann, a commentator on the book of Genesis, writes: *“The barrenness of Sarah is an effective metaphor for hopelessness. There is no foreseeable future and no human power to invent a future.”* 2

This is a big part of the story of Abraham and its lesson for us. Over and over, the Scriptures try to teach us that when we live by faith, part of what it means is that our hope doesn't depend at all on things looking hopeful. It's great when things do look hopeful, and often they do. God so graciously and generously blesses us in so many ways! We'll see that in the story of Abraham, but sometimes we just have to cry out like the most faithful followers of God so often do in the Bible. The book of Psalms is full of people praying to God and saying *Lord you are my hope! In you alone I have set my hope! Some trust in Chariots, some trust in horses, but my hope is in the Lord my God!*

God initiates your pilgrimage of faith in this life. 1.) *He often does this in surprising ways.* 2.) *It is always as a gift of grace.* 3.) *He gives you a new identity.* 4.) *And all of this is a basis for hope, even when things don't look hopeful.* It's important to remember all of that especially when the journey of life, the pilgrimage of faith brings you to a

particularly significant crossroads, a rough section, when it is all uphill, uneven, dark and hard to even discern the best way forward.

I find that sometimes people ask questions like this: *“If I go on with God - if I say ‘yes’ to God, will I have to do this one thing I don’t want to do? It differs – it might be will I have to stop doing this, or start doing that? Will I have to break up with my boyfriend or girlfriend? Will I still be able to live the lifestyle I want to? Will it all work out – whatever that means in the mind of the person asking.* I had a professor who said when he was a younger pastor, he tried to carefully answer all those questions. But he began to realize how wrong his whole approach was. Because when you say to God: *“I’ll answer your call in my life if you show me exactly where it will take me and you show me exactly what you will ask me to do and how much it will cost,”* there's a sense in which you really aren't really answering what's at the heart of the call at all. What's really at the heart of the call is your willingness to make God your God - your willingness to trust and obey him as your God and your Lord. If you demand answers before you trust and obey God, then you are still holding on to the key issue, which is the surrender of your will in faith to God. The call to faith is a call to trust God and to wait to see him prove faithful in ways that may surprise you.

## **II. GOD INITIATES THE LIFE OF FAITH, AND WE BEGIN OUR PILGRIMAGE BY TRUSTING HIS PROMISES.**

**Genesis 12:1-3** begins with one command. God says: *“Abraham, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. He is calling him to leave everything. That’s what God asks. Then, immediately, he gives Abraham multiple promises.*

- 1. I will show you where to go - I will show you the land. (verse 1)*
- 2. I will make of you a great nation, (verse 2)*
- 3. and I will bless you (verse 2)*
- 4. and make your name great (verse 2)*
- 5. so that you will be a blessing. (verse 2)*
- 6. I will bless those who bless you, (verse 3)*
- 7. and him who dishonors you I will curse, (verse 3)*
- 8. and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (verse 3)*

So you have one command followed by eight promises, and then **verse 4** says, *So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.*

*So, what does it mean for you to live by faith today?*

**A. We begin the pilgrimage of faith when we receive God's promises and trust in them.**

One of the great truths we will explore throughout this series is the way in which the Bible connects Abraham's faith in God's promise with our faith in Jesus and the promise of the gospel. It helps to understand Abraham's story as a crucial part in the larger story that runs through the whole of the Scriptures and intersects all history and our own lives!

***The promises God makes in Genesis 12 are part of his keeping the promise he made earlier in Genesis 3.*** After Adam and Eve sinned against God. God came to them with a promise. He said he would create a people who would stand with him against Satan and send a Savior, *"the seed of the woman,"* who would be wounded but would crush the serpent, Satan. God calls Abraham as part of the fulfillment of *that* promise. God is saying to Abraham, Your family is going to be the family through which I fulfill those promises and bless the world. "I am going to make of you a family who will stand for me, and I am going to give you a land where you can live as my people, and through this people, in this promised land will come the Savior and from him the defeat of Satan and blessing for the whole world.

***The story of the Bible shows us the unfolding of that ancient promise.*** The genealogies of Jesus demonstrate that he comes from the family of Abraham. In his death and resurrection, he pays for our sins, fulfills the promises of the prophets, and crushes the head of the serpent. Just as Abraham began his relationship with God by grace through faith in God's promise – so also do we! **Galatians 3:7** says, *Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.* Then **verses 8-9** say, *And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."*<sup>9</sup> So then, *those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.* The vast family God promised Abraham is revealed in time to

include not just Abraham's physical descendants but all who share his faith and believe in the promised Savior. The promise of the *land* is expanded in **Romans 4** to include the promise of the whole world under the rule of Christ as Lord. The *blessing* includes all the gifts of grace offered to you through the cross of Christ: forgiveness, a new birth, and the Spirit of Christ indwelling and empowering us. Like Abraham, we enter a relationship with God by faith in God's promises.

### **B. We pilgrims make progress when we walk by faith every step of the way.**

**Genesis 12:1** *Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. Where exactly is this land, LORD? God said: "I will show you." "Sarah, pack up. We are moving away from everything we know. Where are we going? I'm not sure exactly. How are we going to know when we get there. God will show us. Later, God says: "I will make you a great nation and bless the world through you." When will you do that, LORD? God said: "I will show you." Later STILL God says: "I will give you a child in your old age through your barren wife?" How can you do that, LORD? "I will show you." Then, in the greatest test ever, God says: "Take your son, your only son, and sacrifice him to me." How will you fulfill your promise, then, LORD? "I will show you."*

When I was studying different passages that speak to this idea of our calling I was reminded that one of our most famous promises in the Bible is specifically addressed to those who are called. **Romans 8:28** says, *And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*

### **C. Our faith is demonstrated when we trust and obey.**

In **Genesis 12:1**, The Hebrew uses two words to say "go," which adds an emphatic "you." *"You, go from your country."* The *King James Version* gets the feel of the command here well when it says: *"Get thee out..."* For every one of us today, there is something to face or obey that requires a willingness to rely on God's promises and act in

obedience. What will you do? Abraham said “Yes” to God. **Genesis 12:7-9** tells how he traveled to the Promised Land and traveled the length of it and worshiped God. We will look at that in more detail next week. He failed a lot, but he kept on. God uses the story of Abraham to call you to trust in Him as well.

## CONCLUSION

There is an old story about a young Christian who was walking with an older man who had been a mentor to him. The young man was pouring out all his concerns. What would happen to Him? How was God going to lead him in his life? The older man snapped a rosebud off a bush and handed it to him. He said: *“Try to open this up without tearing any of the petals.”* He tried. Of course, it was impossible. The older man said: *“This is just one little flower designed by God, but I cannot unfold the petals with these hands. God can open this rose up so sweetly, but I don't know the secret or have the power to unfold a flower. If I do not have the power or wisdom to unfold one rosebud, how could I think I would have the wisdom to unfold a life?”* Then the old man quoted this poem: *The pathway that lies before me, Only my heavenly father knows. I'll trust Him to unfold the moments Just as He unfolds the rose.* The poetry may be simplistic, but the truth in it is anything but. And what's true personally is true historically in terms of God's larger plan for the planet. That's part of the story of Abraham. It's our story, too.

The way all of these stories in the Bible end up leading us to Jesus teaches us that God is worthy of our trust. To fulfill the promise and bless the world, God, in Jesus, left heaven and came to earth. He went to the cross to lay down his righteous life as a redeeming sacrifice to pay for our sins. He rose again from the dead and fulfilled all of the ancient promises and prophecies. He offers himself to you. Trust in him. Trusting him as your Savior, walk with him in this pilgrimage of faith. Let him unfold your life according to his plan as you keep on trusting and obeying, step by step, day in and day out.

**Amen**



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1 Literary editor Robert McCrum says, "there is no book in English apart from the Bible, to equal Bunyan's masterpiece for the range of its readership or its influence on writers as diverse as C.S. Lewis, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Charles Dickens, Louisa May Alcott, George Bernard Shaw, William Thackeray, Charlotte Bronte, Mark Twain, John Steinbeck and Enid Blyton."

2 Brueggemann, Genesis pp 116