

"It's A Pilgrimage Not A Picnic"

I once read about a college student who was giving an elaborate class presentation on the law of the pendulum. He went into great detail, teaching the principle he was going to demonstrate. The law of the pendulum is that because of friction and gravity, a pendulum can never return to a point higher than that of its original release point. The student demonstrated the principle with a three-foot piece of string and a toy top. He then asked how many people believed in the law of the pendulum. The whole class and the teacher raised their hands. He then invited the teacher to come over to a large structure he had assembled and brought to class. Hanging from the beams was a pendulum made from 250 pounds of metal weights. The student asked the instructor to sit in a chair with the back of his head against a cement wall. Then, the student brought the 250 pounds of metal up to the teacher's nose. Holding the huge pendulum just a fraction of an inch from the teacher's face, he restated the point. *"If the law of the pendulum is true, then when I release this mass of metal, it will swing across the room and return short of the release point. You will be in no danger."* The student asked, *"Sir, do you believe this law is true?"* There was a long pause, and then he whispered, *"Yes."* The student released the pendulum. It made a swishing sound as it arched across the room. At the far end of its swing, it seemed to pause momentarily, and then it started back as the teacher dove from the chair to safety.¹ The class learned two things: they learned the law of the pendulum and they also learned that it is one thing to believe something when it's only theoretical. It's different when things that matter are on the line.

We've begun a series from Genesis on faith in the life of Abraham. It's titled *A Pilgrim's Progress*. In the New Testament, **Hebrews 11:13** tells us that Abraham lived, by faith, as a pilgrim on the earth. God uses his story to teach us how we grow beyond a faith that's theoretical to a faith that is trusting. The better we understand that the more equipped we are to experience life in a relationship with God, get through its difficulties, glorify God, and grow stronger spiritually.

In this pilgrimage, we're on...

I. THE LIFE OF FAITH IS A LIFE OF RELATIONAL RESPONSIVENESS TO THE CALL OF GOD!

Genesis 12:1 just begins with, *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 initiates with Abram. The same pattern gets played out in unimaginably diverse ways in the lives of innumerable people. In **Romans 4**, Abraham is called the father of *all of us who believe*, so his relationship with God is a sort of template for us today. Maybe God calls you providentially by placing you in a loving family where mom reads to you from Scripture and faith is the atmosphere. Maybe God calls you on a college campus. Maybe he comes to you in a mid-life crisis when you've tried everything and nothing has worked. God breaks into our lives with grace and calls us in many ways, just as Jesus called his first followers by the Sea of Galilee.

As we begin our pilgrimage, God strengthens us with promises. In **Genesis 12:1-3** when God calls Abraham, he repeats the phrase *"I will"* over and over again, and each one includes promises. **Verse 2:** *And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.* **Verse 3,** *I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.* When God calls he makes promises. We trust Jesus as our Savior, and he promises to save us! The book of Galatians tells us that all who believe in Jesus inherit the promises made to Abraham. We become part of a great holy nation made up of people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. We are promised the whole constellation of blessings encompassed by salvation: new birth, forgiveness, and His Holy Spirit. We're promised not just a particular holy land in the Middle East; **Romans 4** expands the promise of land made to Abraham to include the whole world,

the new heavens, and the new earth for all believers! All these promises are given to all of you who believe when you're called to begin a pilgrimage of faith that leads to personal transformation. For you now, it's not about moving geographically but about growing spiritually.

As you respond to God with faith and obedience, God reveals himself to you more fully. You begin to see that in **verse 4** *So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him.* God calls and Abraham responds. There is a rhythm in the story. As Abraham responds to God's promise, God reveals himself more fully and renews the promise repeatedly. **Genesis 12:7** *Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.* As God reveals himself and renews his promise, Abraham responds again. **Genesis 12:8-9** *From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. ⁹ And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.* It's good to mark the progress you make in your pilgrimage. Think about the hymn *Amazing Grace* and the line *Tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will bring me home.* There is an interesting contrast here between *pitched his tent* and *built an altar*. The force of it is to say the only constant thing he's leaving behind as he journeys by faith are memorials to God and his worship of God. Things are going well!

Verse 8 says, *He called on the name of the Lord.* In response to the call *of* God, we call *on* God. In *The Silver Chair*, one of the Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis, the story begins when the girl Jill and her friend Scrubb are in trouble. She calls out to Aslan, the Lion, who is the Christ figure in the story. They are immediately transported into his world, Narnia. He tells her that he has called her to carry out a task, which he will give her. This confuses her, and she says, *"Could there be some mistake because nobody called me and Scrub? We called out to you for help.* He says, *"Yes, but you would not have called me unless I had been calling you."* Lewis wrote that because he saw that principle in Scripture and experienced it in his own life. He was called by God and surprised by joy. There's a tremendous humbling strength in the realization that in the pilgrimage of faith, we're responding to the call of God. I love the verse in the book of Philippians that says *he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.* Why was Abraham willing to leave the security and highly cultured civilization of Ur of the Chaldees? Why would he leave familiar people and places to begin a Pilgrimage of faith, not truly knowing where he was going? He did it because he was responding to God's calling.

Now, as the story unfolds, something interesting happens.

II. AS WE LIVE A LIFE OF FAITH, THINGS HAPPEN THAT PUT TRUST TO THE TEST.

Genesis 12:10, *Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.*

A. The tests of life can come to you even when you are right in the place where God has led you.

In fact, spiritual triumphs in the journey of faith are often followed by severe testings. After his most dramatic public victory the prophet Elijah fell into his deepest depression. After his greatest revelation of the reality of heaven, the apostle Paul was given a thorn in the flesh. The gospels tell us that after Jesus is blessed by the voice of the Father saying *this is my beloved son with whom I'm well pleased* he's driven into the desert to be tested by the devil. It's weird, and yet it's the way things are! Spiritual triumphs are often followed by severe testings. We need to learn from these stories and not be unprepared when the testings come. We can't let difficulties destroy our confidence or dampen our commitment to God. Faith must develop muscle and the only way for faith to develop muscle and resilience is to be removed from the softening elements of familiar surroundings and fulfilled expectations so that forward progress requires trusting dependence.

B. We need to learn to recognize the tests of faith and to be careful about how we

respond.

The blunt, merely factual statement in **verse 10** makes no mention of God. It says *Abraham went down to Egypt to sojourn there for the famine was severe in the land*. This is significant even if the significance doesn't jump out at you. The call-and-response rhythm between God and his servant is interrupted. This proves the first step in a detour that gets sketchier. There's a lesson here. Imagine if I said to you, "*I am convinced God called me to be the pastor of this church,*" but then I told you, "*things got challenging, so I left to find an easier and more lucrative career.*" You might wonder, "*Do you think God who called you there wanted you to leave simply because it was hard? Did you pray about that?*" Sometimes, we don't recognize a test of faith as a test of faith. We encounter a situation and we just think, "*I know what to do.*" Do we? Could your challenging situation be a part of the pilgrimage to which God has called you in which he wants to form you? The pilgrimage is not a picnic so we need to pray as we go forward.

There's another example from, *The Silver Chair* by Lewis. There is a place where Aslan is speaking to Jill. They're on a mountaintop, and he's telling her things and stressing that she must remember them. He's giving her signs to look for and telling her what to do when these things happen. Then he warns her of something. He says the moment that she is off the mountain, she's going to be bombarded with a clouded mind. He says, "*Here on the mountain, the air is clear, and your mind is clear, but as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. The signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look when you meet them there.*" Jill's constant struggle in the story parallels our own struggles in life. When we are worshipping together or reading Scripture alone in the quietness of the morning, everything seems so clear. When we step out and into the world, the things that happen to us and even the things that we're afraid might happen to us can distract us from the simplicity of the foundational questions: *what has God promised, and what does God want?*

C. Fear-based human calculations can never protect you in the way that trusting obedience to God can.

Genesis 12:11-13 says: *When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, ¹²and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake."* Sarah was his half-sister. They were married before he was called and before that kind of thing was forbidden in Scripture. The point here is that Abraham thinks the fulfillment of God's promise requires ingenuity on his part. He's choosing to be deceptive, to put Sarah in a dangerous position, and to protect himself even if it puts her at risk.

We're often a lot like Abram and he's really just like us. It's easy to start imagining scenarios and asking questions that are understandable but not ultimate. *What if I miss a promotion or lose my job because of my commitment to Christ? What if I get out of this ungodly relationship and then never find the love I long for? What if I give to God faithfully and my financial needs go unmet?*" Those are understandable questions, but if we're not careful, they can so fill our hearts that we overlook questions that are more crucial - like, *What has God promised, and what does God want?* Abraham doesn't seem to be asking those questions! *What has God promised? What does God want?*

Sometimes you can do the wrong thing, and at least at first, superficially, it looks like it worked out well for you. Verses 14-16: *When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁶And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.* These stories in Scripture are not simplistic moralistic lessons. We've hardly begun the story of Abraham's pilgrimage, and we've seen that you can do the right thing

and get tested. Then you can do the wrong thing, and it looks as if you're being blessed. Of course, at this point in the story, wouldn't you like to know how Sarah felt as she was being introduced into Pharaoh's harem? The thing is when we begin to operate out of a heart that is fear-based instead of faith-based we lose sight of God's promises and our commitment to obedience. When we don't seek his wisdom and submit to his will, even if things for a season seem to be working out, we risk hurting other people whose lives are ill-affected by our choices.

God wants us to trust, but when we falter, he is faithful. **Genesis 12:17-20:** *But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. ¹⁸ So Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹ 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 go." ²⁰ And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.*

III. THE LIFE OF FAITH IS VINDICATED BY THE LORD HIMSELF, WHO WILL, IN HIS OWN WAY, PROVE HIMSELF FAITHFUL.

There are a lot of questions we might ask about this story, but we aren't given those details. The point of the Scripture is summarized in the first three words of **verse 17:** *"But the LORD..."* Abraham created a problem by his cowardly failure to rely on God, *but the LORD proved faithful!* Sarah was taken to Pharaoh's palace, *but the LORD proved faithful.* Will Abraham trust in and obey God's promises? Partially but never perfectly and consistently. Will the Lord keep his promise? Yes!

A. God is faithful in fulfilling his promises.

If you want to know how far God is willing to go to demonstrate his faithfulness to his promises in spite of human weakness and sin, look at the cross of Christ. In the end, God's promise to bless the world through the family of Abraham is revealed as requiring nothing less than the cross of Christ. **Galatians 3:8-9** tells us that *the Scriptures, foreseeing that God would bring salvation to all nations through faith in Christ, announced the gospel in advance to Abraham when it said: "All nations will be blessed through you."* ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. The blessings of the gospel are forgiveness, eternal life, God's presence, and Spirit; all of this can only be ours because of Christ. His living, dying, and rising again was to pay for our sins, secure our salvation, and fulfill God's promise. You don't earn or deserve your place in and participation in the fulfillment of promises. You just turn to Christ and trust in him. We receive salvation not because we are faithful but because we have placed our faith in the faithfulness of God. We don't earn heaven because we have successfully completed the pilgrimage and passed the tests. It's all grace from beginning to end. So you can trust God.

B. You can trust in God.

Sarah, who we will hear more from later, couldn't completely trust Abraham, but she could trust in God. Severe circumstances, sketchy husbands, scary situations, none of those things will keep God from fulfilling his promises. And for Abraham, God wants to show him and us through him that even his human failings will not keep God from fulfilling his promises. The lesson of a story like this is not that our choices don't matter or there aren't consequences. It's not that people can't be hurt or that blessings we would have experienced can't be forfeited. No! But the lesson is that in the pilgrimage of faith, God's promises can be trusted, and they should be.

CONCLUSION

Gladys Aylward was a missionary to China prior to World War II. She was forced to flee for her life when the Japanese army invaded China, and atrocities were committed. With only one

assistant, she led over a hundred orphans over the mountains toward freedom. Her story was the inspiration for the movie *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, in which Ingrid Berman played her character. But during this agonizingly difficult and frightening journey out of war-torn China - she struggled with powerful feelings of hopelessness and despair. After passing one sleepless night, she faced the morning with no hope of reaching safety. A thirteen-year-old girl in the group reminded her of their much-loved story of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. *"But I am not Moses," Gladys cried in desperation. "Of course you aren't," the girl said, "but God is still God!"* You are not Moses, and you are not Abraham, but the truth is even Moses and Abraham were not perfectly and consistently faithful. But God is faithful, and God is still God. Hear what God is saying. He is saying: *"I am faithful. Trust in me – you need to trust me because it's a pilgrimage not a picnic!"*

Amen

A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Almighty God, Thank you for calling people like me to hear and receive your promises of grace. I confess that I have lived my life not in surrender to your will but in self-will. I have been indifferent to your wisdom and a stranger to true worship. Thank you for Jesus, the promised Savior. I believe Jesus died to pay for my sins and rose again as Lord and Savior. In repentance and faith, I receive and rest on him alone for my salvation. Amen

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

O, Lord. I confess that the pilgrimage of faith is often a challenging journey for me. It is my own fault. I, too often, prioritize my comforts over your callings. I too often act out of self-protective and over-confident impulses, as if I know what I am doing. But I don't. I earnestly need your grace to save me from myself and to show me the best way forward. Help me to surrender to your will and to your plans, fully depending on your grace and as I walk with you. I ask this in the name of my powerful and gracious Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

¹ Ken is, *How To Speak To Youth*, pp 104-106