BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies in The Book of Genesis: People Relating to God

Lesson Four

Abraham: Following By Faith

**Focal Text**

**Background**
Genesis 11:27—25:11

**Main Idea**
By faith and in spite of his continuing doubts, Abraham responded to God’s life- and world-changing promise to bless all the peoples of the earth through him.

**Question to Explore**
How can we believe—and continue to believe—when to believe seems humanly impossible?

**Quick Read**
God calls us to stay faithful to the last word he gave us and open to the next.

**Commentary**
Consider the following important facts: there are more chickens than people in the world; a cat has thirty-two muscles in each ear; an ostrich’s eye is bigger than its brain; when the University of Nebraska Cornhuskers play football at home, the stadium becomes the state’s third largest city; and the microwave was invented after a researcher walked by a radar tube and a chocolate bar melted in his pocket.
Now aren’t you glad you consulted this week’s commentary?

To the world of our text, the stories we’ll study this week must have seemed like so much pointless trivia as well. Who cared what happened to a nomadic immigrant and his nondescript family? What difference would his religious commitments make to his larger culture, much less the generations to come?

As it turned out, the story of Abraham changed human history irrevocably. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all see him as a founding figure in their faith. More than half the world views him as one of the holiest people of all time. The good news is that his Lord is our Lord. The God who chose to use this man of faith chooses to use you and your class.

Your larger culture may not pay much attention to what you teach this week. But the King of kings is ready to make your words eternally significant. What is your next step of obedience with him? What is God asking you now to do in your service to his kingdom? How is God calling you into greater surrender and faith than you have ever known?

Go when God calls (11:31—12:9)

Our text proves the saying that the gate of history turns on small hinges. The story of Abraham comprises one of the longest narratives in Scripture, occupying Genesis 11:27 to 25:11. It begins, however, in a most innocuous way: “Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there” (Genesis 11:31).

God began dealing with Abram in his homeland: “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran” (Acts 7:2). “Ur of the Chaldeans” was an ancient city located 220 miles southeast of Baghdad, near the Persian Gulf (as it was in Abraham’s day; the coastline has moved eastward since). He lived in the region we call Iraq today.

In ancient times, his hometown had a population of 300,000 to 400,000 and was one of the most significant cities on earth. From here the family moved to “Haran,” a city located in modern-day southeastern Turkey near the northern border of Syria. Jacob fled to this city and his uncle after stealing his brother’s blessing (Gen. 27:43); there he met Rachel.

Upon leaving their homeland, Terah’s story ended: “Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran” (11:32). But his son’s story had only begun: “The LORD had said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you’” (12:1).
Why take such an audacious step? God’s promise is still being fulfilled, forty centuries later:

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.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you (12:2-3).

This passage is often called a *fulcrum text*. The rest of Genesis hinges on this text. Note God’s intention to “bless” Abram and to use him to “be a blessing” to others. The Hebrew syntax of this text indicates that the latter is a consequence of the former.

God would keep his promise to Abram and his descendants through Isaac, Jacob, and then Judah: “The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his” (Gen. 49:10). Jesus’ descent from the tribe of Judah fulfilled this promise (Matthew 1:2-3), a fact made clear to the Jewish people by Peter:

You are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, “Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.” When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways (Acts 3:25-26).

Jesus’ mother would see her Son’s coming birth as fulfillment of this promise:

He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
evén as he said to our fathers (Luke 1:54-55).

God would keep this promise to Jesus’ royal ancestors as well:

- To David: “I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth” (2 Samuel 7:9).
- To the “king,” probably Solomon: “May his name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun. All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed” (Psalm 72:17).
God’s promise to Abram was fulfilled for the Gentiles as well:

- The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted (Psalm 47:9).
- . . . Those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:7-9).

How did Abram respond? “So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran” (Gen. 12:4). In addition, “He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there” (12:5).

More specifically, “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” (12:6). “Shechem” was located thirty-five miles north of Jerusalem and served as an important trading site in antiquity. Its “great tree” was probably a giant Tabor oak which served as a landmark in Shechem. These trees were known for their dark green foliage and broad branches. “Moreh” means teacher, perhaps indicating that a famous teacher used the shade of this oak as his classroom.

God then assured Abram that he had done the right thing: “The LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him” (12:7). Building an “altar” indicated publicly Abram’s commitment to his God, and was also equivalent to claiming this land for his deity.

Then his journey continued: “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. Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev” (12:8-9). Note that Jacob and his family would also visit Shechem (Gen. 33:18-19) and Bethel (Gen. 35:1-7). The “Negev” toward which Abram continued is the arid land southwest of the Dead Sea.

The writer of Hebrews comments on this man’s faith:

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the
same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose
architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:8-10).

In the same way, God calls us to be his “ambassadors” today (2 Corinthians 5:20).
Ambassadors live in foreign countries but are always citizens of their own nation. They
represent an authority more powerful than they, and can say only what they have been
given to speak. They never think of the nation they have been assigned as their home, for
it is not. So it was with Abram, and so it is with us: we are “looking forward to the city
with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

It is never too late to begin serving the true God. Abram was seventy-five years old (Gen.
12:4), but he would live another century: “Altogether, Abraham lived a hundred and
seventy-five years” (Gen. 25:7).

Nor is it too soon to give yourself fully to your Father’s purpose for your life. Today is all
there is. How much does tomorrow weigh? What color is yesterday? The psalmist
reminds us: “This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm
118:24). Oswald Chambers asserted,

> The promises of God are of no value to us until by obedience we understand the
nature of God. We read some things in the Bible three hundred and sixty-five
times and they mean nothing to us, then all of a sudden we see what God means,
because in some particular we have obeyed God, and instantly His nature is
opened up. “All the promises of God in Him are yea, and in Him Amen.” The
“yea” must be born of obedience; when by the obedience of our lives we say
“Amen” to a promise, then that promise is ours.”

Can God call you to do anything and go anywhere today?

**Believe what God promises (15:1-6)**

It is hard for us to give such unconditional submission to a God we cannot see or touch.
When God calls us to take our next step of faith, we are more empowered to follow
obediently when we remember the promises he makes to the faithful. Remember that our
God “does not lie” (Titus 1:2). When we believe his promises, we are able to follow his
call.

After the pivotal event that defined his life and future, Abram escaped a famine by
traveling to Egypt (Gen. 12:10-20), separated from Lot (Gen. 13), rescued his nephew
from kings who pillaged Sodom and Gomorrah (14:1-16), and received the blessing of
Melchizedek, king of Salem (14:17-24).
Then the Lord confirmed his promise to Abram in a decisive way: “After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward’ (Gen. 15:1). The statement, “the word of the Lord came,” is common in prophetic literature but occurs only here in the Pentateuch. Visions were given to prophets throughout the Old Testament; they were sometimes heard audibly or seen visually, or could be experienced in dreams. We can assume that this “vision” of Abram was similar to such prophetic experiences, for he was also “a prophet” (Gen. 20:7).

Like us, Abram had questions for God. The Lord invites his people, “Come now, let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18); the Hebrew could be translated, Come, let us argue it out. Jesus could cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46), echoing King David’s earlier complaint (Psalm 22:1).

Abram was likewise troubled: “But Abram said, ‘O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?’” (Gen. 15:2). This is the first time in Scripture that Abram is described as speaking to God. He repeated his concern for emphasis: “And Abram said, ‘You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir’” (15:3). It was customary in Abram’s day for a servant to be designated as the heir of a childless landowner. If this occurred, however, God’s promise to bring a people biologically through Abram would fail.

God was not offended by Abram’s issues; to the contrary, God answered his questions with compassion and encouragement: “Then the word of the LORD came to him: ‘This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir’” (15:4).

To remind him of his Lord’s omnipotence, “He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be’” (15:5). Astronomers tell us that roughly 2,500 stars are visible in ideal viewing conditions to the unaided eye at any given time. Of course, God’s point was not numeric but symbolic—this childless, elderly man would produce offspring as numerous as the most numerous dimension of his natural world.

Abram’s response has stood from then to today as an example of true faith: “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (15:6). “Credited” could be translated reckoned or declared, describing God’s decision to consider Abram’s belief “as righteousness.” Abram did not earn such a distinction—his faith positioned him to be made righteous by the Holy One.

This catalytic event and its significance is echoed often in Scripture:
“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness’” (Rom. 4:1-3).

“He did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why ‘it was credited to him as righteousness.’ The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (Rom. 4:20-24).

“Consider Abraham: ‘He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham” (Galatians 3:6-7).

“Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,’ and he was called God’s friend” (James 2:21-23).

When we remember all God has done for us, we are better able to trust him for all he will do for us. Consider three examples.

One: your Maker has given you a heart that pumps enough blood more than 1,900 gallons of blood through your body every twenty-four hours. Every day it exerts as much effort as it would take to shovel twenty tons of gravel onto a platform as high as your waist.

Two: God has made you of protons, the core of atoms. Look at the dot on an “i” in your Bible. It holds something in the region of 500,000,000,000 protons, more than the number of seconds contained in half a million years. Your Father made all of that, for you.

Three: you live in a visible universe that is now calculated as a million million million miles across, 1 followed by 24 zeroes. Through a telescope you can see around 100,000 galaxies, each containing tens of billions of stars. And you’re watching all this on a planet which spins at the speed of 1,000 miles an hour at its equator. Your Father made all of that, for you.

Now, what’s your problem?

Trust the future to your Father (17:1-8; 22:1-18)

When we believe in God’s promises and purpose for today, we can trust him with tomorrow. Following his vision, Abram sacrificed to God and received further
confirmation of his blessing (Gen. 15:7-21), and fathered Ishmael through Hagar (Gen. 16). Then God renewed his commitment to his chosen vessel.

*Claim God’s promises*

Our story continues: “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless” (17:1). Thirteen years had passed since the birth of Ishmael (16:16). “God Almighty” translates *El Shaddai*, a common name for the Lord in Hebrew.

If Abraham would make this commitment, God would “confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers” (17:2). There are no examples in the ancient world of gods initiating a “covenant” with their subjects. The Hebrew word meant to *bind together*. By this “covenant,” the God of the universe bound himself to do what he promised for his servant Abram.

“Abram fell facedown” (17:3a), an act of complete submission. Abram went to his hands and knees with his forehead touching the ground. Such an action placed a man completely at the mercy of another. When Abram made such a commitment to God, the Lord responded to his submission with five promises.

First: “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations” (17:4). “Many nations” points to the universal nature of God’s purpose for Abram. He would be the “father” or genesis of peoples across the land, not just a single tribe.

Second, “No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations” (17:5). “Abram” meant *exalted father*; “Abraham” meant *father of many*. Names denoted character and power. By changing Abram’s name, God described his purpose to come and demonstrated his power to make this purpose a reality. “I have made you a father of many nations” speaks of this promise as a completed fact, although it has not yet come to pass.

Third, “I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you” (17:6). To this point Abraham, now ninety-nine years old, had only one child, but he would soon be “very fruitful.” Not only would “nations” come from him, but “kings will come from you” as well. His line would produce royalty and realms.

Fourth, “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you” (17:7). These promises would continue far into the future.

Fifth, “The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God” (17:8). Moses later fixed the borders of this land:
Your southern side will include some of the Desert of Zin along the border of Edom. On the east, your southern boundary will start from the end of the Salt Sea, cross south of Scorpion Pass, continue on to Zin and go south of Kadesh Barnea. Then it will go to Hazar Addar and over to Azmon, where it will turn, join the Wadi of Egypt and end at the Sea. Your western boundary will be the coast of the Great Sea. This will be your boundary on the west. For your northern boundary, run a line from the Great Sea to Mount Hor and from Mount Hor to Lebo Hamath. Then the boundary will go to Zedad, continue to Ziphron and end at Hazar Enan. This will be your boundary on the north. For your eastern boundary, run a line from Hazar Ênan to Shepham. The boundary will go down from Shepham to Raphlah on the east side of Ain and continue along the slopes east of the Sea of Kinnereth. Then the boundary will go down along the Jordan and end at the Salt Sea. This will be your land, with its boundaries on every side (Numbers 34:3-12).

Although Abraham’s descendants would not take this land for centuries, it was already promised to them by God.

Act on his call
God then initiated the rite of circumcision (Gen. 17:9-27). Abraham pled for Sodom and Gomorrah before they were destroyed (Gen. 18—19); he was prospered by Abimelech (Gen. 20), fathered Isaac (Gen. 21:1-7), sent Ishmael and Hagar away (21:8-21), and made a treaty with the Philistines which ensured his continued security (21:22-34).

Now we come to one other episode in Abraham’s life and story deserving of attention this week: the trial by which he proved his faithfulness for all time in offering Isaac to his God (Genesis 22:1-19). The text begins: “Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ ‘Here I am,’ he replied” (22:1). Note that the word “test” here does not mean to tempt to do wrong, but to test so that we can do right. The Hebrew word nawsaw means to test and prove something, to show that it is so. God would give Abraham a faith test, and he would pass it with great obedience.

The test: “Then God said, ‘Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about’” (22:2). Abraham had waited twenty-five years for this son. When he was born God had promised his father, “it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned” (Gen. 21:12). And now God clearly told this elderly man, more than 110 years old, to sacrifice him to God.

“Go the region of Moriah,” to Mount Moriah. This is the most significant single mountain in the world today. Where Abraham offered Isaac, David later offered sacrifice to God on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite (2 Samuel 24:17-19). And so Solomon, David’s son, built his temple here and made this rock at the top of this
mountain his Holy of Holies (2 Chronicles 3:1). Today this rock is enshrined in the Dome of the Rock, the Muslim structure completed in AD 691. It is the holiest spot on earth to the Jews, and third holiest to the Muslims. They both claim it. And the Middle East conflict which continues today comes down to it.

But long before all of that, a conflict raged here in the heart of an old man. He was to “sacrifice” his son here, to slit his throat and burn his body. To give up his beloved child, his heir and legacy and future, everything that mattered to him. To give it all to God.

Abraham’s response: “Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about” (Gen. 22:3).

Abraham and Isaac got up early in the morning and traveled by foot more than 40 miles over three days. How could this father make such a commitment to his Lord?

Because he trusted God to keep his promises no matter the circumstances or apparent future. Hebrews 11:19 explains, “Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.” He knew that if God wanted him to sacrifice this son, God could raise him back to life. God could still keep his promises and make him his heir. God could do whatever God wanted to do.

We see such faith in his response to the servants: “On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, ‘Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you’” (Gen. 22:4-5). Somehow he believed that his son would survive this test of obedience.

We see his faith in his response to Isaac:

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together (22:6-8).

God did just what Abraham believed he would:

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”
“Here I am,” he replied. “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided” (22:9-14).

Once more God renewed his covenant in response to Abraham’s faith:

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me” (22:15-18).

Abraham trusted God with his best, and God did more with it than Abraham ever could. He made this one child the father of the Hebrew people. Through his descendants God brought his own Son, who died on his own sacrificial wood as our sin offering to God.

And now because of what God did through Isaac, Abraham’s seed, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:28-29). Through Abraham’s child we are all God’s children. All because he gave his best to God, and God blessed it and is using it still today.

Now God calls us to put our Isaac on his altar today. Eric Liddell did. The Scotsman who won the gold medal in the 1924 Olympic Games turned his back on fame and fortune to serve God as a missionary in China. He died in a prison camp there, but the Oscar-winning movie *Chariots of Fire* told his story to the world. He put Isaac on the altar, and God is using him still.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer did the same thing. This German genius was safe teaching theology in New York when he returned to Nazi Germany to fight Hitler and serve God with his life. He was hanged on April 8, 1945, but his theology and his witness are more powerful today than when he was alive on this earth. He put Isaac on the altar, and God is using him still.

Benny Newton followed their example. Latino trucker Fidel Lopez was being beaten by the crowd during the Los Angeles riots of 1992 when Rev. Newton saw the uprising on
television and ran to break things up. He threw his body over Lopez’s and yelled to his fellow black neighbors, “If you kill him, you’ll have to kill me, too!” He had a small ministry in the inner city and died of leukemia the next year. But his story has been told all over the country since. He put Isaac on the altar, and God is using him still.

When was the last time you dedicated your future to the God of eternity?

**Conclusion**

If Noah had been afraid to trust the will of God in building the ark, would he have survived the flood? If Moses, with his stuttering problem, had refused to say to Pharaoh, “Let my people go,” would he have died in Egypt? If David, the small shepherd boy, had been intimidated by the threats of Goliath, would he have been king? If Isaiah had been afraid to say, “Here am I. Send me,” would he have become Jesus’ favorite prophet? If Daniel had feared the lions more than the Lord, would we know his name? If Jonah had persisted in fearing Nineveh more than he feared God, would we have his story?

If Peter and Andrew, James and John had been afraid to leave their nets and boats to follow Jesus, would they be honored by Christians today? If Paul had been more afraid of the authorities than his Master, would the New Testament be half its size? If John had been more afraid of jail on Patmos than Jesus, would we have the Revelation?

Our problem is, we are no judge of future significance. I have no idea what, if any, of my present activities will outlive me. I’m not alone in such predictive myopia. No one in the Bible received a five-year plan from God. Paul wanted to go east when he was called west (Acts 16:6-10). He had no idea his mission to Philippi would introduce the gospel to what we know as the Western world. Jesus’ counsel was blunt: “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:34).

The will of God seems to be more a flashlight in the night than a roadmap in the day. A wise friend once counseled me, “Stay faithful to the last word you heard from God and open to the next.” So let’s leave tomorrow to our Father and try to follow him today. After all, all of God there is, is in this moment.
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