

*“Faith’s Obedience”
Genesis 11:27-12:9
Dr. Jerry Nelson*

When did you first become aware of God’s claim on your life? I am not asking when you first became aware of your need for forgiveness or when you first were afraid of dying or you first were afraid of hell or even when you think you first became a Christian. I’m asking when you first became aware of God’s right to control your life. When did you become aware that God’s goals for your life were different than your goals? When did you realize that a decision had to be made about who would order your life? Would you follow God’s direction for your life or your own?

Can you think back (maybe a long time ago for some of you, maybe not so long ago for others of you) to a time or several times when your relationship with God hung in the balance? A time when you knew God was pointing you in a different direction than the one you were taking. You knew a life change was called for and maybe you struggled with whether to respond.

I was 19 years of age and studying at the University of Wisconsin. From as far back as I can remember thinking about a life’s career I had wanted to be a lawyer then in governmental politics. But at 19 I was struggling with what God wanted. I remember well, during that struggle, I was reading from the Apostle Paul’s letters in the NT. It seemed that almost every section of the letters I read shouted to me that the direction I had set for myself in life was not God’s direction for me. To Timothy Paul wrote, “And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and... a teacher.” “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” To the Colossians, Paul wrote, “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy...” Every day I struggled with the difference between my plans for my life and what seemed to be a growing sense of God’s plans for my life. And it was not so much

vocation (what occupation I would be in) as it was purpose (for what purpose would I be living). It all seemed to boil down to **whose purposes** would occupy my life.

Have you had those times - Those times when it was just you and God and life that were in focus? - Those crucial times of decision? The struggle in those times is not just with desire. It is not just a matter of what I wanted to do versus what God wanted me to do. It was deeper than that. It is a matter of who do I most believe – God or me? Several influences combine to tell me that if I follow my own leading I will get what I want from life. Those influences include my own self-centeredness, what the world around me says is important in life, and what I see that others possess or accomplish that looks so appealing. The evidence seems so compelling that I am almost forced to believe my way is the way to get what I want from life.

*But contrasted with that, God says a different goal and a different path to that goal is best. But I only have **his** word for that – and the evidence all around me says you get what you want from life by taking your own path. Who do I believe? Who do I trust my life to?*

*My hope is that by now you have identified a time in your life, maybe right now, when God got your attention regarding what your life is all about. In our study of the book of Genesis, we come again to the 12th chapter. There are two great issues addressed in the opening section of this chapter: The first is God's plan for all the peoples of the world for all ages – which was addressed in a previous lesson. The second issue in this 12th chapter is individual faith – each individual's response to God's plan. More specifically **this text is how one man, Abram, trusted God.***

Genesis 12:1-9:

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.”² “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.”³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev

When I reduce the lesson of this passage to one sentence it is this: When Abram heard God’s command, he obeyed God and he worshipped God.

Verses 1-3 he listens to God

Verses 4-6 he obeys God

Verses 7-9 he worships God.

Hearing, obeying and worshipping God sound rather straightforward and simple, even easy. But many of us know it is not as easy or automatic as it sounds. And it could not have been easy for Abram either. When we look at the next few chapters of this book we will discover that Abram struggled with trusting God. It was if one day he did well and the next he lost it, only to repeat that cycle several times. Sounds like a normal person to me.

*When we look at the first three verses of chapter 12 we hear God speaking and Abram listening. God gives a command and a promise. First **the command**: Abram “leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. Then **the promise**: “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 the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

A command with a promise is the way God comes to people.

*Through **Solomon** he said, **(Command)** “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not unto your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge him **AND (Promise)** he will direct your paths.” To the **disciples** Jesus said, **(Command)** “Follow me **AND (Promise)** I will make you fishers of men.” To the **Philippian jailer** God through Paul said, **(Command)** “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ **AND (Promise)** you will be saved.”*

*In God’s command, Abram was being asked to radically alter his life. It happened to **Moses** at the burning bush. It happened to **Paul** on the road to Damascus. It happened to **Samuel** in the Temple. It happened to **Matthew** in his business office. It happened to **Peter, James and John** by their fishing boats. Every person confronted by God is confronted with the same life-changing decision – **who** will you trust **AND for whose purposes** will you live?*

Abram was to turn his back on the past and go a different direction in life. He was asked to break the ties with what was familiar, comfortable, and secure and step out trusting God. He was asked to give his attention, his energies, his resources to accomplishing a new goal in life – God’s purposes for him rather than his own.

From the text we know Abram was a successful businessman. He was responsible for many people. It would seem that he had more than enough reason to stay put in Haran, take care of his responsibilities and enjoy the life he had made. But right in the midst of his success and his security God said I want you to follow me.

*That’s how God comes to us today. **He comes with a command and a promise.** The **command** is to trust and obey him. The **promise** is manifold: He promises to **forgive our sins.** He promises to **give us peace** that passes understanding. He promises to **give us his presence** each day. He promises to **give us a reason for living** that transcends our selfishness and lasts beyond our years. He promises **a return on our investment** that exceeds our wildest imagination. He promises us **a future** that death cannot destroy.*

Okay, Abram, what will you do? We've already been told in chapter 11:30 that you have known for years that your wife Sarai is unable to have children. God says to change your life and follow him and he will make you into a great nation – a family so large that it becomes a huge people group – a nation. **What will you do, Abram?**

Abram heard the command and the promise – what **does** he do? Verses 4-6 – Abram obeys. “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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.

This is truly amazing to me. And it must have been amazing to the author of the book of Hebrews, 2000 years later, as well. For when he speaks of men of great faith, he writes: ^{HEB 11:8} 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.

The author of the book of Acts in the NT was also impressed: “So Abram left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living (Canaan – Israel). ⁵ He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time **Abraham** had no child. ⁶

Abram **obeyed** – he left Haran and went to Canaan. **Faith that doesn't obey isn't genuine faith.** Abram could have said, “I hear you God, I know you God, I love you God, I will do a lot for you God, but I'm staying in Haran.” The disciples could have said, “I will follow you Jesus but I will do it from our fishing business.” Matthew could have said, “I love you Lord, but I can't give up my tax business.” But faith that doesn't obey isn't genuine faith.

I can imagine Abram having a struggle. “God, you say you will give me a land of my own but I don’t know where it is. “God, you say you will give me a large and great family but I know I can’t have children. “God, you want me to leave Haran when everything I know, love and depend on is here. And God says, “That’s right, I want you to trust me.”

*Jesus said it this way: Matthew 10:37-39 "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.*

*And in Luke 14:26-27 he said it even more sharply: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ And anyone who does not carry his **cross** and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

Obedience is the test of true faith.

*1 John 3:10,18 “This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not **love** his brother... Dear children, let us not **love** with words or tongue (only) but with actions and in truth.*

James said it this way: James 2:17 “...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead.”

*The test of Abram’s faith was his obedience to God’s command. What enabled Abram to obey? **He trusted God**. It is as simple as that. Abram what you will give up by following me is **in**significant compared to what you will gain – will you believe me? God says, “Abram, you and Sarai say you can’t have children and after probably 40 years of marriage and now 65-75 years of age, everyone agrees with you – but I say you **will** have children – will you believe me?*

Gordon Wenham wrote this: “Abram is (asked) to do something of which God is the sole guarantor of its successful outcome.” (Wenham 282) Abram had to leave what he **could** see to discover what he **couldn’t see**. He had to part with the familiar and the successful to go to what was only a promise. He had to decide if he would simply believe God – when much of the evidence pointed elsewhere.

Here is what Abram did. He looked at the **God of the promises** and saw a **person who was trustworthy** and he looked at the **promises of God** and saw something more solid and substantial than what he already had and what his own direction for life was offering.

In Matthew 19:28-29 Jesus said to us, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”²⁹ And everyone who has left **houses** or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

The world says plan your life around your family, your friends, your profession, your business, your financial security, and your enjoyment of life. Jesus comes to us and says plan your life around him and his kingdom. Jesus comes to us and says I want you to plan your life, invest your life, and evaluate your life by a whole different standard than before. When God confronted you about the purposes of your life what did you do? When it was just **you, God** and **your life** that was in focus, what did you say to God? When he gave you his command to follow him and he promised he would provide, what did you say? Did you tell God you were worried about the future – that you didn’t know whether you could trust him or not?

As God said to Abram so Jesus has said to us: Matthew 6:31-32 “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these **things**, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these **things** will be given to you as well.”

Do you believe God that if you actually turn the control of it over to him he will provide? **Do you dare to trust him** with the direction of

*your life? **Do you trust him?** Does your trust **exhibit itself in obedience** to his will for your life?*

*There is something about this story of Abram that is encouraging to me. For in Abram I think I see something of myself – my own reluctance, my reticence. The book of Acts tells us that Abram was called by God when Abram was still in Ur of the Chaldees, quite a number of years earlier. Abram apparently heard God at that time but something happened on the way to obedience. Abram’s father, Terah, and Abram and Sarai and Abram’s nephew Lot left Ur and started out in the right direction. But 11:31 says when they got to Haran they settled there. They had been told to go to Canaan. This looks like the **partial obedience** we are so prone to. We will try to appease God by partially obeying but not fully obeying. We try to strike a bargain with God – I will live a moral life, I will give some of my income to the work of Christ’s Kingdom, I will invest some of my time in doing good things in the church and community – BUT I can’t go all the way. I’ll work my own plans for my life AND I’ll give something to God along the way.*

At 19 years of age I struck a bargain with God – so I thought. I would leave the University of Wisconsin and go to Moody Bible Institute and learn the Bible better so when I went back to studying law and became a politician, I would be a better politician. I’d stall my plans for law school by giving God part of what he was asking of me. For three years I wrestled with God – Moody was my “Haran”. Finally God got through to me that partial obedience wasn’t obedience at all. I had to decide who was in charge of my life – God or me.

God graciously came to Abram again when Abram had only partially obeyed. He started but he stopped. God just as graciously comes to us today and once again offers his command and promise. Are you ready to commit it all to God? Are you ready to honestly open your life’s plans to God, to direct as he sees fit?

*Some of you have been playing **partial obedience** for years. You have hoped you could **buy God off** by giving him **something** so you wouldn’t have to give him **everything**. What will you do now?*

I said earlier that Abram's obedience amazes me. When he had nothing but God's word for it – he trusted God and left the security of his own plans to follow God's plans – even though he didn't know how God's promises could possibly happen.

*Just as amazing to me is the attitude Abram had **while** he obeyed. Two times in verses 7-9 it says that Abram built an altar to the Lord. We all know from the OT that building an altar meant that Abram worshipped the Lord. Abram didn't just obey God because he had no alternative. He obeyed God because he trusted God. It wasn't that Abram did it reluctantly or grudgingly but he did it with a heart open to God and in love with God. **He didn't know** for certain what land God would give him, **he didn't know** how God could give him children and yet he stepped out **and enjoyed God** in the process – he worshipped God.*

When I speak of Abram's worship I don't mean that he just went through rituals of some kind. Worship is a matter of the heart. Worship is our hearts open to God's heart. Worship is demonstrating our love with words and actions that reveal our deepest feelings toward God. Worship is enjoying his presence and telling him so.

*Abram didn't know what the immediate future would hold, he was asked to believe promises he couldn't humanly believe possible, he was asked to just trust God and obey. And he left everything that was secure and familiar, **and he loved and worshipped God in the process.***

*Years ago I told you of my own struggle with trusting God around the issue of the baby boy named Paris who lived in our home. The future for that precious little boy looked so bleak that we could hardly stand it. We were asked to trust him to God, to believe God would do what was right. In one sense we had no choice – we had to simply obey and care for Paris while he was with us. But worship God in that obedience? Express an open-hearted trust and love for God in the process? That was much harder. I wanted God to change the circumstances immediately. I wanted God to demonstrate **now, how** he will guarantee a future for Paris. To enjoy God, worship Him, while he keeps us in the dark seems a difficult thing to do.*

And yet, Abram left everything that was familiar, secure and reasonable and followed God's plan for his life. And so strong was his trust in God that he enjoyed God while he was obeying him – he worshipped God. That's faith. Abram listened to God, obeyed God and worshipped God. Truly he is an example for all ages of a man's trust in God.

Where are you in this example of faith? Have you listened to God? Have you heard his call on your life to live it for his purposes and according to his plan rather than your own? Have you obeyed? Have you made the radical shift from following yourself to truly following him and giving yourself to his kingdom?

I believe, God confronts each one of us at some point with who we will trust and who we will follow? How are you responding? Will you trust him, obey him, and worship him? Do you need to make a decision today?