

# REAL FAITH Part 3

## THE JOURNEY OF FAITH

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Faith is not a destination; faith is a journey. Faith is a pathway, a manner of living day to day.

Faith is not something that happens to you. It is a gift from God by which you make things happen in your life. If you hold that gift passively, it is like wishing you were somewhere else, without rising from your chair — that's a daydream.

Faith is something you do, as you trust in God.

You may trust Him to inspire you, to lead you, to protect you, to provide for you, to orchestrate your circumstances, to give you courage to meet them, and wisdom to make the most of them.

You may trust Him to strengthen you when you are weak, to heal you when you are sick, to encourage you when you are afraid, to provide what you lack, to secure what you entrust to Him, to give rest when you are weary, to give hope in your despair, to give peace in the midst of turmoil, and to bring you safely home to Him.

Among other things, the Bible is a collection of stories of men and women who lived by faith. These put flesh on the principles of God's Word and help us see how those principles can be lived out in the day-to-day world.

Referring to some of the experiences of the ancient Israelites, as they journeyed from slavery in Egypt to the land of promise in Canaan, Paul wrote: *"These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come"* (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Thus, the Old Testament documents are not obsolete for followers of Jesus Christ. The First Covenant, given to Moses, has indeed been replaced by a newer and better covenant in Christ. But the Old Testament is still God's Word. The principles of its dogma and the lessons of its history are still applicable today, and helpful for our journey of faith.

### **Abram's Call**

Consider the journey of Abram (later known as Abraham, the "father of the faithful"). As a young man, still living in the home of his father, Terah, he married, but his wife was unable to conceive a child.

His father moved the entire family westward, toward the land of Canaan, but stopped for some reason short of that goal and set up his final camp in what became known as Haran, the name of Abram's brother, who had died. Why Terah stopped traveling west is not told us directly, but there are some clues. For one thing, Terah apparently had no direct communication from God about the trip, he was just following a hunch.

I would call it a godly hunch, for it fit in neatly with God's plan for his son, Abram. Yet, this hunch could not provide the strength and courage necessary to complete the journey. Apparently, he did not

even get beyond the border of his own country. The fact that the town where he stopped was named for his dead son, Haran, suggests that grief may have weighed him down and, failing to value the destinies of the two sons who remained, he built a shrine to his loss, and his own life came to a halt for his final 60 years.

But while Terah's life was stalled, Abram's was getting a kick-start.

When Abram was 75, God interrupted his life. He spoke to Abram, and Abram heard Him say, *"Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you"* (Genesis 12:1).

This initiated a period of devoted following in Abram's life. Leaving all that was familiar, he and his wife, Sarai, and his nephew, Lot, traveled from one altar of worship to another as they continued the journey his father had begun, which had now become the journey of his own destiny.

But he still had many lessons to learn to fulfill God's calling.

### **Distractions Abound**

Pressed by a severe famine, they moved farther south into Egypt. For fear of his life, he passed his wife off as his sister. This did spare his life, and earned him many gifts, but when the Pharaoh, who wanted to marry Sarai, discovered his treachery he was angry and sent them all out of the country.

Now, back in Canaan, Abram resumed his pattern of worship. Nevertheless, disputing broke out between the household of Lot and the household of Abram and the family was divided once more.

Again, God's words pierced the darkness, as he promised Abram vast wealth and legacy, and Abram was moved again to pursue God in worship.

Then war broke out in the region and Lot and his household were captured. Abram gathered his servants to arms and performed a daring nighttime rescue of all the people and their goods.

As he returned from the victory, he was met by the king, God's priest, Melchizadek, who blessed Abram in God's name. Then, Abram gave a tithe of all he had recovered, and returned the rest to their home.

### **Doubts Arise**

After some time, apparently, Abram began to be afraid that God's promise would never come to pass because he had no son to carry on his family's name and purpose. God came to his aid again, saying, *"Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great"* (Genesis 15:1).

To further encourage him, God gave Abram an amazing promise: *"You will have a son of your own who will be your heir." Then the Lord took Abram outside and said to him, "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!"* (Genesis 15:4-5).

*Genesis 15:6 And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith.*

Yet, Abram's faith was still growing, and he asked God, "How can I be sure?"

So, God made a covenant with Abram, in which He predicted the enslavement of his descendants (the Israelites) by the Egyptians and the date of their eventual release and their return to the land God had promised to him and to them.

In the midst of cutting the covenant, vultures swooped down to interrupt the ritual and steal Abram's sacrifices. He had to drive them away before the ceremony could be completed.

No doubt, some of you have experienced the interruption of "vultures," threatening to steal what you had dedicated to God — your time, your money, your talent, or your worship. You cannot reason with them, and you dare not entertain them; the only way to deal with such distractions is to forcefully chase them away.

Because of the earnestness of Abram's faith, the covenant was completed, and God gave to his descendants all the land, from Egypt's border to the Euphrates River!

## **Helping God**

But Abram's wife was becoming desperate for the son God had promised, and devised a plan to help bring the promise to pass in a way that seemed good to her. She persuaded Abram to sleep with her servant girl and if she bore a son they would adopt him as their own. It was a clever ruse, but it backfired!

Sarai got her wish but her sense of guilt made her bitter against the servant and her son and she threw them out. But God rescued them and sent them back and Abram took them back. He was 86 when Ishmael was born.

There followed 13 years of silence from Heaven. But then, God spoke to Abram again, revealing Himself as Almighty God. At once, Abram fell face down on the ground in worship, and God renewed His covenant with Him.

*Genesis 17:4 This is my covenant with you: I will make you the father of a multitude of nations! <sup>5</sup> What's more, I am changing your name. It will no longer be Abram. Instead, you will be called Abraham, for you will be the father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you extremely fruitful. Your descendants will become many nations, and kings will be among them!*

God gave him a new name, representative of his life's purpose, and with it, a corresponding requirement: the mark of circumcision, which was to be required of every succeeding generation, as confirmation of their covenant.

## **Promised the Impossible**

Then, God changed Sarai's name to Sarah, and promised them a natural son of their own (Abraham was 99 and Sarah was 89, well beyond child-bearing ages).

In the midst of his worshipful response, Abraham chuckled at the thought, and again proposed that Ishmael could serve as his heir.

But God said, "Not your way, but mine," and assured him that Sarah herself would give birth to a son.

Then, it was Sarah's turn to laugh, saying, "How could I be so blessed?"

God asked, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

In fear, Sarah denied doubting, but God said, “No, you did laugh.”

Abraham was moved in faith, and began to intercede for his relatives, who were living in a very immoral city. He reasoned with God that His righteousness and mercy precluded His punishing righteous people along with wicked ones. God was moved by his faith and specially delivered his nephew, Lot, from the judgment that rained on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Then, Abraham moved south again, among people he did not know, and he became fearful for his life, as before. Once again he lied, saying that Sarah was his sister, with similar results.

## **The Final Test**

Sarah did bear the son God had promised. But after some years had passed, God tested Abraham’s faith by asking him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, in an act of worship.

Abraham obeyed. He did not hesitate. He was resolute. He told his servants, “The boy and I will return.” Even Isaac cooperated (though I don’t think his mother knew what was happening). And at the last moment, with knife raised to slay his precious child, God interrupted him again, saying, “*Now I know that you truly fear God. You have not withheld from me even your son, your only son*” (Genesis 22:12).

Abraham’s faith had matured. He now trusted God, no matter what. He believed that God could even raise the dead, if necessary.

By a miracle, God provided an alternate sacrifice and Abraham’s worship was completed and he and Isaac returned home.

## **Keep the End in Sight**

Faith’s journey has a blessed beginning, but along the way there are lots of ups and downs — worship and obedient devotion, mixed with threats, distractions, fears, and doubts, and all the wrong choices that often accompany them. Still, faith’s journey also has a blessed ending, if we will just hang on for the ride.

Jesus said, “*Everyone who endures to the end will be saved*” (Matthew 10:22).

God sees the end from the beginning, and if we, too, will keep our eyes on the end that *He* has in mind, we will find grace to help us weather the middle, no matter what.

## **Our Local Journey**

In 1984, I heard God say to me, “I want you to become a pastor to the County of Marin.” I had no idea what that meant, but I knew it could only be fulfilled here, so my family and I moved here.

I found a congregation divided by distrust and hostility, but we pressed on in faith. Did we do everything perfectly? No, but we stuck it out together and began to see recovery and growth.

Then God set us up for a doctrinal conflict, over which the church divided. I myself was inclined to leave, but He said, “Walk a few more steps with them.” His idea of a “few steps” has now lasted more than fifteen years. We began again to see recovery and growth.

Then came a financial crisis. We tried to help God. We did everything we could think of to halt the decline, but we continued to run in the red every month of 1995. Finally, we tried a method that God suggested: we began to tithe all undesignated income to other ministries. Immediately (within two weeks), our financial picture reversed, and we have operated in the black since that time. More recovery and growth.

Then, God gave a vision for building and ministry expansion that would carry us into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The church was united behind the new direction, and we began to work the plan. Then, unexpectedly, the housing market, on which we had begun to depend, stalled, and with it our plans to build, and the revenues for which we hoped are being eaten away by the bank month after month, with no certain end in sight.

Yet, during this delay, we have begun to clarify and recover our sense of God's purpose for the church and for each of us who call it our spiritual home. What will the end be? Only God knows when, but it will be blessed, because it the end He has planned from the beginning!

He did not bring us out this far to take us back again. He did not bring us here to be eaten alive by giant problems.

*Romans 8:35 Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? <sup>37</sup> No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.*

He is conforming us to the likeness of His Son, Jesus. And we are learning new lessons of faith, and discovering new ways to trust God, in the face of whatever life throws at us. Whatever we may have lost He has promised to restore. And we still have more than most of the churches in the County. And we're still doing more for others than many other churches are.

We are still making the journey together, and Jesus is still leading His church. You will be His representatives in the marketplace and the workplace, and I will be a pastor to the County, reaching unchurched people for Jesus.

He will build this church and the gates of hell will *not* prevail against us, because we are His covenant people.

And we are BLESSED!

## **So What?**

Paul said these stories have a purpose beyond merely recording history: they are examples to teach us how to live *our* lives.

Abram's story teaches (as do many other Bible stories) that the journey of faith is neither smooth nor straight. It is fraught with curves and dips and potholes and low-hanging branches. There are strange sounds in the night and bandits to beware of. There are religious people hawking their gimmicks or demanding compliance. There are our own conflicting desires and choices guided by self-interest. And there are many perplexities. There are side trips and detours. There are stalls and delays.

Still, altogether it is the journey of *faith*. Blessed at its beginning and blessed at its end, and guided by God's presence (whether felt or not) all along the way.

Jesus said, "*Be sure of this, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20).

*Philippians 1:6* *God, who began the good work within you, will continue His work until it is finally finished on that day when Christ Jesus comes back again.*

*Hebrews 13:5* *God has said "I will never fail you. I will never forsake you."<sup>6</sup> That is why we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, so I will not be afraid."*

It is time, once again, to renew your faith in God and your consecration to Jesus Christ.

Thank Him for His abiding presence and tender care. Praise Him for His unfailing love.

Magnify your Deliverer and Redeemer. Worship God Almighty.

Put *all* your trust in Him today. Renew your pledge to follow this Great Shepherd, no matter what.