

**Hebrews 11:8-10:** By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup> For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

**Genesis 12:1-7:** 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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." <sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. <sup>5</sup> And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, <sup>6</sup> Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. <sup>7</sup> 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.

## Introduction

In Hebrews 11.8-10, we have NT summary of Genesis 12-25 in three verses (three verses for 13 chapters). The writer gives us perspective on Abraham's faith in a light sketch. There are three things that reveal his faith. They furnish us with both a rich example to follow and meaningful encouragement to do so. In three words, these things are obedience, appropriation, and endurance. They give us this outline for today: 1) Abraham obeyed God's call, 2) he embraced God's promise, and 3) he endured God's testing.

### 1A. By faith, Abraham obeyed God's call

In verse 8, we read: **By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place.** The Genesis account does not mention the idea of a call for there the narrator seems to drop us right into the middle of the events: **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** (Gen. 12.1). There is surely more here than a simple direction to leave his homeland. The idea of the call is much richer. This account actually fills out some of that richness. Calling begins a life of faith and prompts a life of obedience.

#### 1) On one hand calling begins a life of faith

Note the combination of ideas here. God is the subject. He spoke to Abraham and what He said to him gave a command to leave the home and family of his father. This personally voiced communication by the Lord to Abraham (stated in Genesis) indicates the meaning of God's call (stated in Hebrews). In other words, God's call establishes communication, begins a life of faith, and initiates conversation in which faith seeks God's presence and will.

Suddenly, Abraham's life in Ur of the Chaldees came to a screeching halt. God intervened in the affairs of his daily walk. This call parallels Noah's reception of grace. Both Noah and Abraham were originally part and parcel with the pagan fallen world. For Abraham, it is clear that he came from a family of idolaters (Josh. 24). His call paralleled the call of Noah from being one with pagans to a radical separation from them. In a word, God's election and call brings us into a new walk in life, a walk with God (sinners find treasure they are not looking for).

#### 2) On the other hand, the call to faith is a call to obedience

Calling to faith is a call to obedient good works. The Lord tells us this much in Genesis 18.19: **For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice.** This has to remind us of Ephesians 2.8-10: <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. In context, this Ephesians passage tells us that the entire

package of “salvation through faith” has no basis in anything that we do but is God’s gift. Paul makes the point emphatic that it is not of works. However, the gift of faith by God’s call is His work that has the goal of our works of obedience. This obedience of faith is laid out for us ahead of time by God’s foreordaining plan: **God prepared beforehand the good works of obedience that we should walk in them.**

Clearly then, one lesson here is that true faith that reflects the work of God in the life is obedient faith. Notably, Abraham’s obedient faith was immediate. He met God; God introduced Himself to him and gave him a command that would alter his life radically and permanently. Without blinking, Abraham obeyed. God said “get up and go.” Abraham got up and went. “Which way shall I go?” “Not to worry, just pack your bags and get your feet moving.”

By faith Abraham obeyed God’s call.

### 2A. Abraham, by faith, embraced God’s promise

Faith not only hears God’s commands and obeys them, but it embraces His promises and thus appropriates them.

The command to get up and go was oriented to an inheritance. The inheritance focused on a place (**he was called to go out to a place, Heb. 11.8**). But right away there is something ambiguous about this place. It is just “a place” and it sounds at first as if the point is simply “any old place, just leave the place of your upbringing. Just get up and go somewhere, anywhere.” That is practically what happened because the place was unnamed. Abraham did not know where he was going! Nonetheless, he went out from his home in Ur of the Chaldeans: **And he went out, not knowing where he was going (11.8b).**

However, this is a particular unnamed place that God promises to him. It will be his inheritance. It is something that God will give him to possess in the future.

He had nothing to go on about this place except God’s word. God promised that Abraham would receive a place; it would be his inheritance (**<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going**).

He stepped out in obedience with his feet moving even though he was ignorant of where he was going. From Genesis, we know that the Lord told him to go; where he was to go would come later: **Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you (12.1).**

Luther defines faith with the words “not to know.” He says, “this is the glory of faith, simply not to know where you are going, not to know what you are doing, not to know what you must suffer, and with sense and intellect, virtue and will, all alike made captive, to follow the naked voice of God...Abraham with this obedience of faith shows the highest example of the evangelical life, because he left all and followed the Lord, preferring the word of God to everything else and loving it above all things” (Hughes, *Hebrews*, 467).

Despite the ambiguity, by faith Abraham embraced God’s promise of an inheritance and that gave him the strength to obey God’s call to go out to a place as yet unnamed.

### 3A. By Faith, Abraham Endured God’s testing

**<sup>9</sup> By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup> For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God (Heb. 11.9-10).**

God called him to a place unknown but with purpose: for a time of testing, for a journey without the helps and advantages and benefits of the prosperity of his homeland in Ur. At the time of Abraham, his homeland was the center of the civilized world. Leaving Ur was like leaving the city of Boston in the days of the Colonies to live as a stranger among the Indians. He left culture, prosperity, and permanence to replace it with tents and pilgrimage.

But there is a deeply puzzling component to this story. Abraham became an heir of a land without possessing a thin dime of his estate. He had title to the land without owning a single plot

large enough for a burial site for his wife according to Genesis 23.3-4 (<sup>3</sup> **And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites,** <sup>4</sup> **"I am a sojourner and foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place).** He did not own a square foot according to Acts 7.5: **Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.**

His life was characterized by geographical insecurity. Abraham was a migrant, an alien, a sojourner and a pilgrim. Hebrews 11.9 piles up some things that reveal the puzzling character of his life. He was a foreigner in the land promised to him and his offspring. He lived in tents subject to uprooting and movement. Moreover, he lived in tents **with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.** This shows that the walk with God in the land of promise was a life-long multi-generational time of testing. Day after day, month after month, and year after year God said to Abraham: "this is your land and the land of your children and grandchildren, *but...not now.*" God repeatedly directed Abraham's attention to the future.

The puzzling and perplexing aspect of his life was the striking fact that the land of his travels for his entire life was *his land* at the same time that *he took possession of none of it.* He traveled there all his days as a mere transitory migrant with a future outlook, with the promises at his fingertips and literally under his feet. The test of leaving his homeland was small in comparison with the testing in the Promised Land. He finally gets somewhere specific and the land is named, the inheritance is described with its borders...and nothing practical is the result! He has it under his feet now but not yet in his hand. He had to look far into the future; He had to take his eyes off of the things of this earth.

What is the great lesson of Abraham's life? In the history of redemption, the profound lesson is that the attainment of the earthly land was not the end goal (Hughes, 469). Abraham learned that the land of promise was itself a promise of the city of God and that defined the faith by which he endured God's testing: <sup>10</sup> **For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God** (11.10). He looked beyond the land under his feet to what it represented in symbol, namely, that his inheritance and the inheritance of his offspring is not the land of Canaan, but the entire world as Paul puts it in Romans 4.13, the promise was that **he would be heir of the world.** The land was a promise of the world; the earth is his inheritance. The promises looked forward to the restoration of all things beyond history in the heavenly Canaan.

Thus, Abraham looked for a city built by God and not by man. This city that would encompass the entire earth is not a city with the usual design and foundations. It is too big for that. This is a city that contains the new human family redeemed from all the effects of the fall. This is the city of the descendent of Eve and the descendant of Abraham, the true seed, Jesus Christ our risen Lord. This is the city of God incarnate and exalted.

## Conclusion

The three ideas of obedience, appropriation, and endurance in Abraham's experience lead directly to applications to our experience as well. Let us state each as an exhortation.

### 1) Obey God's call

If you are a Christian then obedience to God's call is a fact that continues to exert an impact on you. He called you into fellowship; He made Himself known to you so that you know Him and walk with him in your journey through life. In this context, the very idea of obedience is reworked and refreshed. There is nothing negative or servile in the duty to obey because God gives His commands in the context of fellowship. The only way you lose sight of the joy of obedience is when you lose touch with the things of God.

We might have many reasons to hesitate before a command of God, but that was not the case for Abraham. It is not the case for genuine faith. He obeyed immediately, while God's command was still ringing in his ears.

We used to call for obedience from our sons by using the illustration of the road-runner. We would say to them, “When we give a command, you are to say no more than “beep, beep” and hit the ground running on the path of obedience.”

To illustrate, recently, my wife and I had five year grandson, Jonah, with us at Home Depot. Jonah and I separated from Grammy and then on our return, Jonah quickly ran ahead of me and as he disappeared around a corner in the large store I called out and said, “Jonah, stay in sight.” He could only hear me and for a moment I could only hear his reply, which was “yes, Grandpa” as he came quickly into my range of vision. He heard my call and responded immediately. By the way, Jonah, I should take this opportunity to commend you for that obedience to my call and to encourage you to hear and heed God’s word in the same way. Beep, beep, and hit the ground running in the way of obedience.

Interestingly, this combination of God’s effectual call and your duty of obedience shows that you do not truly or rightly embrace the sovereignty of God if you either deny the power of His call or fail to take up the effort of your obedience. These go together; both are true, important, and applicable. If you claim Calvinism but sit on your hands in idleness, then your belief in Calvinism is false at worst and truncated at best.

### 2) Embrace the promises

You will face times like this when everything is turned upside down in your life. When that happens, you need to see what is going on from the perspective of God’s plan and purpose. Before you let things weigh you down until you can hardly stand up under the burdens of the moment, you need to mark it down that this is not the setback it seems to be. The movement backward is actually more like the movement backward in hitting a baseball or a tennis ball. The body leans back or the arm reaches back in order to gain momentum to meet the ball. Your steps in life are similar under the loving providence of God. You may feel pushed back, but it is for better forward motion. It is so you can step up to the plate and meet life with strength for forward progress. Switching to the battlefield analogy, the movement back of the sword is for greater force going forward. The point is to take up the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God in order to cut through the obstacle and opponents in front of you so you can move from the storm clouds of warfare to the sunshine God has for you around the next corner. He hides a smiling face behind a frowning providence. Therefore, embrace the promises! His goal is not your ruin but your advancement and growth toward greater and greater maturity, toward the blessing of walking with God in better and better knowledge.

### 3) Endure the testing

Not knowing can be very unsettling in the literal sense of a place to live: in seminary days and shortly thereafter, our family moved some twelve times. Some unexpected things occurred that knocked our socks off; they shaped our lives like casting a die for metal or building a form for concrete. I believe that the trials moved us into a grasp of the sovereignty of God that became a foundation of our lives for these forty plus years now. The times were difficult and perplexing but they strengthened my faith and my wife’s faith in the Lord God almighty as sovereign Lord of history and salvation. So, we confess that the Lord is “tender in mercy” and “strong in salvation.” That is why I respect my wife as a Calvinist in the kitchen.

If you hear and heed Abraham’s example of faith then you will obey; obedience will be a great concern in your life and you will be active about it without delay. You will have strength to obey by fixing your eyes on the inheritance that you have as a joint heir with Christ. Finally, both of these things will come together in the testing you face: you will obey in the trials and you will find strength and encouragement to do so by walking with God with hope for the future.

**To the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob be all glory now and forevermore, amen.**