

Faith Reformed Church  
Stevensville, Ontario  
November 23, 2008  
Morning Service

Text: Hebrews 11:8-10  
Sermon: God Calls Abraham to Faith

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; AMEN.

Over the course of the past few weeks we have been studying the faith of our fathers. We saw Abel and the worship of faith, Enoch and the walk of faith and Noah and the work of faith. As we come to our lesson today we come to Abraham, who has been called the father of faith. He has been called that because, after Jesus Christ, I think it fair to say that Abraham is the most important person in the Bible. Now there are any number of great and faithful believers recorded in Scripture—Moses, David, the Apostle Paul to mention three outstanding candidates—but if you were to ask them, “Who is the greatest man of faith in Scripture?” I think they would all point to Abraham. You can think about it this way. Early on in the Bible, in Genesis 17:4, we hear God make this promise to Abraham: “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram [exalted father]; your name will be Abraham [father of many], for I have made you a father of many nations.” Physically, through Isaac, Abraham became the father of the Jewish nation, through whom the Messiah came. Physically, through Ishmael, Abraham became the father of many Arab tribes. Spiritually, through faith, Abraham became the father of a great host of believers. He is, so to speak, the father of Christians like you and me—people from every nation, tribe and tongue, who by faith have

become heirs of the covenant promises given to him and his descendants by God.

You cannot get more “big-time” than Abraham. Consider these facts: The story of Abraham contains the first explicit mention in the Bible of God’s righteousness being imputed to man as the sole means of salvation (Genesis 15:6). Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy of the family of Jesus, tracing the beginnings of salvation back to Abraham. Luke declares that the birth of Jesus occurred in response to God’s promise to Abraham (Luke 1:68, 72, 72). In Romans 4 Paul uses an entire chapter to explain the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone by relying upon the example of Abraham. Paul refers to Abraham throughout Galatians 3 and 4 to prove that salvation is granted apart from works. The great chapter on faith that we are studying in Hebrews 11 saves its longest section for Abraham. There is no more important figure in Scripture than Abraham until we come to the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now this is the good news for us today: The faith that God gave Abraham and which he lived out during his time on earth is exactly the same faith that God still gives to his own—to people like you and me. There are things which connect Abraham, the most important man in the Bible after

Jesus, with believers everywhere. There are things in Abraham's life that we clearly see in our own.

Let's turn to our lesson. "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 Abraham..." The very first thing we have to come to terms with is this: There was nothing in Abraham that commended him to God. God did not look down from heaven to find a person with a little bit of faith—a spark of divine righteousness and say, "Isn't this grand. A person of faith. I think I'll save him as a reward for all he has done for me." No. When God looks down he sees that all people are without exception without faith; they are all part of a common mass of fallen humanity. God's verdict was expressed through the Apostle Paul who, moved by the Holy Spirit, wrote, "All have turned away; they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Romans 3:12). That "no one who does good, not even one" is a universal negative. It includes Abraham even as it includes you and me.

Think of it. Abraham came from a family of idol worshippers. He was undoubtedly an idol worshipper himself. We have Joshua's inspired word for it. When Joshua was about to cross the River Jordan to enter into

the Promised Land he addressed the children of Israel. He had a word for them exhorting them to faithfulness and a full commitment to the Lord and to his ways. This is what he said:

Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River [i.e., the Euphrates] and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants...

Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord (Joshua 24:2, 3, 14).

Abraham was an idol worshipper and yet God chose him to be the father of many, the one through whom the world would be blessed. Why? Why Abraham? Because it was God’s will and good pleasure.

In Deuteronomy 7 God tells Moses why he chose Israel to be the nation through whom the Saviour of the world would come.

The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Here is the simplest way to say it. God loved Abraham because he loved Abraham. God chose Abraham because it pleased him so to do. The reason for God’s choice is not found in Abraham; the reason is found in God. God

loved and chose him because God loved him and chose him. It was as simple and as divine as that. It pleased God to act toward Abraham with saving grace.

Let me make an application. The way God loved Abraham is the way that God loves us. Like Abraham, there is nothing in us to commend us to God. There is nothing in what we have done that makes God beholden to us. Quite the contrary. We were born in sin. We have each of us bowed down to idols of one sort or another. God doesn't owe us anything—except for justice, which would bring our condemnation. And in spite of it all he still loves us. God sought out Abraham and called him out of Ur of the Chaldees and set him on a pathway that would lead him to everlasting life and blessing simply because he loved him. God has sought us out too. He has brought us to this place so we can hear his word. He has set us on a pathway that leads from the darkness of the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of light and life. He has done it simply because he loves us. He did so out of his own good pleasure. And he did so even though to move us from the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of heaven took nothing less than the incarnation, suffering and death of his only begotten Son, the Lord Christ. That's what grace is. It is God's riches poured out upon the undeserving at Christ's expense.

God's call came first. Abraham's faith came next. God called Abraham when he had no faith and promised to bless him; as a result of that encounter Abraham believed and obediently set out on a journey even though he did not know where he was going. Abraham believed God and he acted on his belief. He acted on his belief in the same way that we saw Noah do last week. Noah built an ark because he believed the word of judgement and salvation God spoke to him. He built it even though it took some 120 years of hard labour and even though he had to endure the taunts and the mocking words of his neighbours. I think Abraham must have endured some of the same. Think about it. Abraham had lived for many years in the city of Ur. It was a bustling, cosmopolitan city in its day. Sophisticated. After living in the same city for years Abraham sold his house, packed his bags and loaded up the moving van. His friends and neighbours would have come by. Think of the conversation.

"Hi, Abraham, what's up?"

"I'm moving."

"Why? Is there something wrong with the house? You've been in this neighbourhood for some time."

"Nothing like that. 'I'm going because God appeared to me in his glory (Acts 7) and told me to leave.'"

"God told you to move."

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know; he didn't say."

"Good plan! Have you been drinking?"

The world will not be your friend either, when you obey the voice of the Lord. The people of the world will think you are deluded. They will call you narrow-minded or foolish. They may do much worse. In our prayer meeting on Monday Ravee spoke of how opponents of the gospel would at times gather outside his church in Malaysia and throw stones at the members as they came out of worship. That is nothing new. Mobs used to throw stones at John Wesley when he preached forgiveness and a new way of life to those trapped in chains of sin. While not throwing rocks, sometimes people in our own families will hurl insults at us, mocking us for our faith and for our love of the Lord Jesus. We should not be surprised at any of this; it happened to our Lord and servants are not above their master.

“By faith Abraham... obeyed and went.” He did. But that is not the entire story, for while Abraham started well he soon faltered. He left Ur of the Chaldees with his family and headed for Canaan. He couldn’t go due west because there was a large desert in the way. He had to make his way north, following the valley of the Euphrates River. Once he was in what is now Northern Iraq he made his way west into Syria. To complete his journey he had to turn south to make his way into Canaan. But he didn’t



turn south. He tarried in a city called Haran. He was there for years, until his father Terah died. Those years in Haran were wasted. Abraham learned no new lessons from the Lord while he was there. Spiritually speaking it was a season of drought.

Has that happened to you? Unless you are a brand new Christian I imagine it has. You experienced God's call. You responded in joy, gratitude and obedience. You were able to withstand the mockery of the world and walk in close fellowship with the Lord. You experienced the sweetness of communion with him. And then something happened. It might not have been dramatic. Maybe it was just "life" that happened—and happened to grind you down. You lost a bit of your enthusiasm—a bit of your joy—a bit of your awareness of the presence of the Lord. You began to neglect, bit by bit, your Bible reading, your prayers and even your attendance at church. You entered into a season of spiritual drought and heaviness where everything seemed to be like a chore and nothing seemed to be free and delightful. Beloved in the Lord, it happens. There are times when, spiritually speaking, we take up residence in Haran. We sit down instead of move forward. Let me encourage you with these words. While these things happen—and they happen not only to you but to many—we must nevertheless not make excuses. We must not sit down too long. Instead we

must confess to the Lord the emptiness of these seasons of life and yield to his repeated calls to stand and follow. For the Lord is persistent in his calling of his people to walk the pathway of life.

God's grace and mercy are such that he does much more than call a person once. He called upon Abraham to renew his journey to Canaan. He called upon others repeatedly as well. Let me give you a couple of examples. Think about David. God called him to lead his people. David did a fine job until one year, rather than go out into the field with his army, as he should have done, he stayed at home. He saw a woman named Bathsheba. He seduced her. He had her husband killed. He thought he had gotten away with it. God did not let David continue down the road to destruction. He called to him through the prophet Nathan who confronted him, convicted him and led him to confession, repentance and restoration.

God called Jonah to go east to Nineveh. Jonah didn't want to answer the call because if he did he knew the Ninevites would repent and be saved and Jonah hated the Ninevites and wanted them to be destroyed. Instead of going east, Jonah headed west, as fast as he could go. God did not let Jonah continue to walk the pathway of disobedience; he called to him through a storm and then through a great fish. In the belly of the fish God brought Jonah to a place of repentance and obedience and then vomited him up on

the shore that he might walk in the pathway he had laid out for him.

Beloved, God has called us not only once, but time and again and while we may have our own Haran or Bathsheba or Tarshish, God remains insistent. His love will not be denied. Return to the Lord and you will find his favour.

Abraham was called by God before he had faith—just like us.

Abraham's walk of faith was sometimes strong and sometimes not—just like us. There is another similarity between Abraham's faith and ours. It is found in the rest of our lesson. Let's pick things up at verse 9:

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 promises. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Abraham, his faith renewed by God's call, made his way to Canaan. When Abraham finally arrived in the land which God had promised he would possess he found that it was occupied by Canaanites—idol worshippers who did not know the Lord. And so Abraham lived in the land of his inheritance as a stranger in a strange land. The land had been promised to him and his descendants, but if you went to the Canaanite land registry you would not see his name on any papers. It was his already by way of God's promise but he did not have possession of it.

This is where our faith is like Abraham's faith too. This is what I mean. We have great promises from God which belong to us now. We have the promise of peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have the promise of eternal life. Listen to this promise, given to all who serve the Lord:

They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

We have the promise that one day God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. But while the promises are ours and are unshakable they have not yet been granted to us in all their fullness. We know God's promises are true. We are fully confident in his word. But we see them by faith, not sight, and from afar, not from here. So right now, in the meantime, we have to struggle against the world, and the flesh and the devil. Right now we have to battle against growing cold and indifferent toward the things of God. Right now we have still to fight the good fight of faith for while the war is won, the battle is not yet over.

Let me close by pointing to two things the sojourn of Abraham in Canaan teaches us about the Christian's life of faith. First of all, it teaches us that we live in a world that is not our own, as pilgrims rather than owners.

We do not belong to this world but to another. The Apostle Paul put it this way in Philippians 3:20: “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.” Our allegiance belongs to another realm. That is why we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Richard Philips put it this way:

As strangers, our long-term interests are not attached to this present world, which we know is passing away. We do not find our comfort here, not because we are a difficult sort of people, but because our permanent home is elsewhere and we have a growing homesickness for the place where we belong.

That’s why we are not to hold on too tightly to worldly things or to let them grip our hearts. John wrote this in his First Letter (2:15-17): “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does, comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”

First, then, like Abraham, we are to remember that this world is not our true home. Second, like Abraham we are to live as those who expect to wake up soon in realms of glory. Abraham “looked forward to the city with foundations.” Permanent foundations. Foundations planned and built by

God. He knew that it was only in such a city that he could be truly at home, for by God's grace he had been fitted for eternity. He could not be satisfied by anything less. We are to keep that vision before our eyes too, remembering that our only comfort in life and in death is that we belong to Jesus Christ and are made for his kingdom. Listen to these words of John MacArthur:

The Christian...is willing to forsake the present glory, comfort and satisfaction of this present world for the future glory that is his in Christ. In contrast to the "buy now—pay later" attitude prevalent in the world, the Christian is willing to pay now and receive it later. What makes Christians willing to make such sacrifices? Hope, based on faith, that the future holds something far better than the present. Paul writes in Romans 8:18, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

God called Abraham even though he was a sinner, lost and on the way to hell. He planted faith in his heart and moved him to walk in obedience. In seasons when Abraham's faith grew weak, God renewed his call and strengthened him to obey. And Abraham, by God's power, walked by faith through this present world with his eyes fixed upon the things above, trusting that God's promises would be fully and finally accomplished in God's good time and according to his eternal plan. Now let me say those words again, with a minor change, and let them sink into your hearts to be an encouragement and a blessing to you:

God called me even though I was a sinner, lost and on the way to hell. He planted faith in my heart and moved me to walk in obedience. In seasons when my faith grew weak, God renewed his call and strengthened me to obey. And I, by God's power, am walking by faith through this present world with my eyes fixed upon the things above, trusting that God's promises will be fully and finally accomplished in God's good time and according to his eternal plan.

In Christ's name. AMEN.