



Lesson 2 | The Highs and Lows of a Life of Faith

Genesis 12:4-20

The life of faith is filled with ups and downs. As we serve the Lord, we will find along life's pathway that when we trust God He will provide and guide us in ways we can't even imagine. Yet sadly, no matter how many times we watch God be faithful to His Word and His promises, our hearts will be tempted to shrink back in fear when a new challenge arises. Far too often we will choose to rest in our own wisdom rather than look to the Lord for guidance, and we will fail in our faith.

How should believers respond to failure?

How should believers respond to success?

The call of Abraham at the beginning of Genesis 12 was a call to a life of faith. Abraham enthusiastically responded to that call and went off on a journey, not knowing where he was going but knowing who he was following. But while Abram had a strong start, within just a few short verses we watch disaster strike as Abraham goes from confidently trusting God to fearfully scheming for his life. Watching his example can be instructive for us because we too can find ourselves going back and forth between a confident faith and a quivering fear.

Abram¹ Journeys in the Promised (12:4-9)

The first snapshot we have of Abram's life after he is given this incredible offer by God to be the father of a great nation and to be a blessing to the entire world shows him to be a man of faith-filled action. Abram leaves Haran to go to Canaan. What follows might seem at first to be little more than a random travel itinerary. But if we read these verses carefully we will see an example of what confidently living for God through faith looks like.

What examples do you see of true faith in these verses?

¹ As with the previous lessons, we will refer to the patriarch as Abraham in the introduction and conclusion and Abram in the lesson.

True Faith Obeys Immediately (12:4)

There is a lot of speculation about where exactly Abram was when God called him, whether his dad should have come, and how long it took Abram to obey. Genesis 15:7 (cf Acts 7:2) says that God called him in Ur, but in this verse, we see him leaving Haran after moving there with his family (cf Genesis 11:31-32). Interpreters argue over whether the call of God in Genesis 12:1-3 is a second call, or whether these verses call back to an earlier time when God had spoken to Abram, and if this is an earlier call whether Abram should have gone to Canaan sooner.²

In the end, it's hard to know for sure because the text doesn't make that explicitly clear. Genesis organizes the story so that immediately after we read the call of Abram we see the obedience of Abram. That immediate obedience is seen elsewhere in the story of Abram as well (for example, Genesis 17:23; 22:3). If God wished that Abram had obeyed sooner, we don't see any statement about that in Genesis. It would seem based on the organization of the book that God sees Abram's faith in this moment as exemplary and immediate.

Many people plan on obeying God but they just never get around to it. Sadly, good intentions can often be enough to calm our consciences down and let us keep living as we desire. But good intentions are not good enough. God is looking for those who will obey Him and His Word immediately, not just say they will obey someday.

Why is immediate obedience hard?

What is the danger in putting faith and obedience off as something to do in the future?

True Faith Sacrifices Blessing (12:5)

When Abram leaves Haran, he is 75 years old. We are told that he left with all the possessions he received in Haran, as well as the servants he had acquired. From this we might guess that Abram's time in Haran was quite successful. We don't know how long he was there, if it was years or decades, but given Abram's old age and the fact that he left with the stuff he got *in Haran*, it would seem he has been there awhile. To uproot everything he had and march off to be a desert nomad, not even knowing for sure where he was going, would be quite the challenge.

As twisted as it might seem, one of the biggest barriers to stepping out in faith can be the blessings of God. God might give you a wonderful family, beautiful home, great job, tremendous opportunities, and then ask you to give all of that up for Him. For Abram this test of God is a trial run for a much harder test that is coming – when Abram as Abraham must be willing to give up his only son because God is asking for him. But even at this point, Abram is learning that all he has belongs to God, and that blessings become burdens when they get in the way of faith.

² The KJV, NKJV, NIV, and NLT begin Genesis 12:1 by saying that “the Lord had said to Abram.” This would suggest that Moses is here recalling an earlier episode, but it doesn't require it. The ESV, NASB, NET, and CSB simply say “the Lord said to Abram.” This could be read either way. The note from the NET Bible is helpful “The LORD called Abram while he was in Ur (see Gen 15:7; Acts 7:2); but the sequence here makes it look like it was after the family left to migrate to Canaan (11:31–32). Genesis records the call of Abram at this place in the narrative because it is the formal beginning of the account of Abram. The record of Terah was brought to its end before this beginning.”

Can you think of biblical examples of those who made the opposite choice of Abram, who decided they would rather hold on to blessings than obey God?

How can we make sure that the blessings of God don't become burdens that prevent us from following God?

How does God respond if we are willing to sacrifice the blessings He has given us so that we can pursue Him?

True Faith Worships God (12:6-8)

As Abram continues his travels, we see that he stops to build altars to the Lord in response to God's direction in his life. God had told Abram that he would show him the place that his descendants would one day receive, and once Abram is in the land God tells him this was the place. Abram responds by building an altar to worship God, and then continues his travel and builds another altar.

Abram's life at this point shows a humble dependence on God and a fervent devotion to God. Wherever Abram goes, we read of him building places of worship. While worship obviously looks very different in the twenty-first century (we aren't building altars, for starters), the priority that Abram is putting on worship is instructive. Altars allowed Abram to recognize what God had done, to give sacrifices, and to call out to God. Christians today should similarly recognize God for what He has done, sacrifice of their time, money, and resources for Him, and call out to Him for help.

How can Christians today prioritize the worship of God?

True Faith Must Be Ready for Trials (12:9-10)

Here we read that Abram is headed toward the Negev desert, located between Egypt and Canaan. And then something unexpected happens – a trial hits. Suddenly, there's a famine. If you are reading through this story for the first time, this might seem odd. Abram is obeying God, worshipping God, and trusting God, and bad things start happening. Perhaps this took Abram by surprise as well. For a migrating shepherd, no water and no grass is a big deal. Sadly, as we will see, Abram was not ready for this trial and responded with fear rather than faith. Trials have the potential to startle us and get our eyes off of God and instead on to the affairs of life. As people of faith, we must be ready for the twists that come our way as we serve God.

How do we prepare ourselves for the trials that we know will come our way?

Abram Heads to Egypt (12:10-20)

After the incredible start that Abram had, we find him headed out of the Promised Land into Egypt. If we know where the biblical story is going and what Egypt will come to represent in the Old Testament, this might make us uneasy. We then we watch in horror as Abram starts making a series of bad decisions that end in disaster, requiring God to miraculously swoop in at the last minute to save Abram. As we watch

Abram's bad decision-making unfold, it's helpful to hold the mirror up to our own hearts and ask ourselves the penetrating question: Have we ever been guilty of going from faith-filled to fear-filled? Looking at what Abram got wrong can hopefully help us know what we need to do when such situations come our way.

Abram Failed to Inquire of God (12:10)

Should Abram have gone down to Egypt? There's nothing explicitly saying he couldn't. It was a time of famine, and the fertile Nile River meant during the famine Egypt had bread for sale. Going there was a simple matter of math. Theologians debate whether it was acceptable for Abram to go to Egypt in the first place, but the reason we are even having that debate is we don't know. And the reason we don't know is Abram never asked God.

We don't know why Abram didn't ask. It doesn't appear to be arrogance or rebellion. Abram seems to just have been living by what made sense to him at the time and didn't think to stop and ask God. It can be all too easy to go from living by faith to living by our own wisdom. Have you ever found yourself struggling with a problem as a result of a choice you made, and then realized you never asked God about that choice? Trusting in ourselves is all too easy and happens all too quickly, but it can have devastating consequences.

Why do we so quickly default to our own wisdom?

How can we make sure that we are following God in every area of life and never leaning on our own understanding?

Abram Failed to Trust God (12:11-16)

Once Abram made the decision to move down Egypt, it's as if God disappeared from his view. We see him lie, we see him abandon his wife, and to make it all worse we see him profiting from all his deception and scheming. Abram fears for his life, and so he leads his wife to lie, and in so doing puts her squarely in harm's way. In all of Abram's calculations we never hear one mention of God. It's as if he's completely disappeared from the picture. This tends to naturally follow from the previous failure we looked at. Once we start down a path without considering God in the picture, He tends to get fuzzier and fuzzier in the background and the problems in front of us become bigger and bigger until we are desperately doing whatever we can to try and solve them. The key is to realize as soon as possible what is happening and be ready to humble ourselves and start following God again.

Why is it so hard to admit that we have not been following God and need to get back to humbly trusting Him?

Abram Hurt Those around Him (12:17)

God told Abram at the beginning of the chapter that if he obeyed, God would make him a blessing to all nations. Yet sadly, in the first account we have of Abram interacting with a foreign nation we read of his selfish choices spelling disaster for the Egyptians. We don't know what exactly that disaster looked like, but Scripture tells us that God "plagued them with great plagues." Whatever it was, it sounded bad. When we choose to live for ourselves, we aren't the only ones who will get hurt. There are people all around you

who will be impacted by your choices. Many want to think that their relationship between God and themselves is simply a private matter, but the fate of others may be impacted by the choices you make.

Who are some of the other people in your life who will pay a price if you live out of fear and not faith?

Abram Failed to Glorify God (12:18-20)

Later in Abram's life people will look at him and recognize that God is with him. His courage will be an example for everyone living on the coast of the Mediterranean to recognize and admire. But here, on Abram's first interaction, we don't get any of that. Pharaoh angrily tells Abram to leave. Pharaoh's quick, rapid-fire questions show how upset he is, and the fact that he commands his soldiers to get Abram and his stuff out of Egypt shows how low an opinion Pharaoh had of Abram.

One of the worst things that can happen when we make the decision that we are going to live by our wits rather than for God is that we fail to point people to God. Rather than others looking through us and seeing the one who is at work through us, they see only another person motivated by self-wisdom. Such a life is unimpressive, and often ends up only making things worse for other people.

How should someone respond if they realize that they have not been honoring God as they ought and that their decisions have diminished people's view of God rather than enhanced it?

God has called us to a life of faith, and that call isn't to something that is impossible. All of us, like Abraham, have the choice to trust God or to rely on our own wisdom. Yet many of us, like Abraham, will waver more than we might like. All of us will have seasons we look back on and realize that we were being driven by fear and our own wisdom, rather than humble dependence on God. The good news is that the God we serve is patient. Abraham sins here, but God doesn't remember Abraham as the guy who got into a mess in Egypt because he didn't ask God for help. God remembers Abraham as His friend and a man filled with faith. God's mercy is great, and He chooses to remember us, not for the lows, but for the highs. So as we look to the example of Abraham, and realize that life is a journey and there will be missteps along the way, let's praise our faithful, patient God and seek to constantly follow Him as live by faith.