

*<sup>1</sup>Now the LORD said to Abram, “Get out of your country and away from your relatives and from your father's house and go to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great. You will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse anyone who dishonors you. All of the families of the earth will be blessed in you.”*

*<sup>4</sup>So Abram went, as the LORD had told him. Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. <sup>5</sup>Abram took Sarai his wife, Lot his brother's son, and all the possessions they had accumulated and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to travel to the land of Canaan. Eventually they arrived in the land of Canaan. <sup>6</sup>Abram passed through the land until he came to the Oak of Moreh at the place called Shechem. The Canaanites were in the land at that time.*

*<sup>7</sup>The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “I will give this land to your descendants.” Abram built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.*

*<sup>8</sup>He moved on from there to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent there, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and proclaimed the name of the LORD.*

“What does it look like?” It’s a question we’re often tempted to ask about faith. We want to know if we look like a Christian. We want to know if our lives look holy enough. But in our complex world where people have various roles, is this a healthy question to ask? Does faith look a certain way? Does God set us all in the exact same mold to live out our faith in the exact same ways? Of course not. Today we look at the faith of Abram, who would later be renamed Abraham by God, not because he sets some standard of faith that we need to reach, but because he shows us three important aspects of the faith in all of us, even when that faith look different for each of us.

The first aspect of faith Abram shows us is that faith looks upward. Up to this point in Genesis, humanity was spiraling. From the fall into sin to the Tower of Babel, the promise of God to bring about a solution looked farther away than ever before. Paganism, the worship of false gods, was prevalent all over the world. When we meet Abram today, he didn’t come from some long background of faith in the true God. In fact, there is pretty good evidence that Abram grew up in idolatry. But this is the one God called to be the father of his people.

The Lord came with a huge command: “Get out of your country and away from your relatives and from your father’s house and go to the land that I will show you.” Abram was to move from a place and people he knew to a place and people that were completely foreign to him. Maybe this would be less radical if Abram were already a man of great faith, but he wasn’t. While we can debate whether he himself was a pagan or not, he certainly came from a line of pagan unbelievers who had no regard for God. But Abraham didn’t drag his feet. He left

the house of his father, something unthinkable in the culture of the day, and went the way God directed him.

This is faith, isn't it? Abram wasn't looking down to himself. He wasn't putting his trust in his own strength or his own ingenuity. He was trusting in God. He was acknowledging that he had a greater father than Terah. So, he left the house of his earthly father to enter the house of his heavenly Father.

Faith is not a feeling. The way we use the word "faith" in modern English gives us the impression that faith is nothing more than blind hope. You tell a friend "you've got to have faith" when the team is down three runs at the seventh inning stretch and he's ready to throw in the towel and go home. But this is not what true faith is. Faith is not blind hope or belief in oneself, which sometimes turns out for your good and sometimes fails. Faith is trusting that God's promises are better than gold.

Listen to how Paul describes Abram's faith in Romans 4: "He did not waver in unbelief with respect to God's promise, but he grew strong in faith, giving glory to God and being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised." Abram was certain that God would keep all his promises to Abram, even as he left what he knew and journeyed out into the unknown.

But this faith of Abram didn't come from him. He did not choose to believe. Instead, God chose him. He did not choose to go. God sent him. And that shows us what faith is and what it isn't. It isn't a demand from God. No, faith is a gift. Abram didn't make faith move. His faith made him move.

What does faith look like in us? We ask that question because we want to measure it. We treat it like rain in a rain gauge. We treat it like weights on a scale. We want to quantify it and compare it. We want to see how it measures up. And who could blame a person for wanting a strong faith?

But doesn't worrying about the size of faith turn it into a work of the law and not a gift from God? If my faith is strong, I take pride in it, as if I'm the cause of faith and not the recipient. If my faith is weak, I start looking for what I can do to fix it, how I can trust God more and how I can be more serious in my faith life.

How your faith looks matters much less than the object of your faith. And truly, saving faith drives people to serve God in many different ways in God's kingdom. What truly matters is what your faith is grounded in. Is its foundation your strength? Is it built on hopes that you have no certainty of? These things aren't faith. They're wishes. They're fairy tales we tell ourselves because we want them to be true. No, true faith looks upward to God's promises, specifically the promise of salvation in Christ alone. Jesus is the object of our faith, the one who makes it move us.

Faith also looks forward. As I said before, God called Abram to leave his father's house and go elsewhere. He was leaving not only safety and familiarity behind, but he was leaving his history behind too. It doesn't take much imagination to understand what was being asked of Abram. In our close-knit community, retiring down south can be a major change socially. I'm assuming, if you've lived here all your life, you run into people you know well pretty much everywhere you go. You see a classmate you went to school with for twelve years at the grocery store. Your waitress is a distant cousin at the restaurant. You meet someone you don't know and play the relation game until you find out that you played baseball with their grandpa. But now, after a lifetime of getting to know the people and the area, including the best lakes for fishing, the best parks for camping, and the best business and contractors for all your needs, you decide to make the trek down to Tennessee. Abram was leaving everything he knew behind, wasn't he? A lifetime of knowledge and experiences that would now be as good as gone.

But where he was going added to the concern too. God was sending him to a land occupied with Canaanites. This land would be hostile to Abram. And as God promised to give Abram the land as his own, the fact that there were already people living there added to the stress of the move. The Canaanites were avowed pagans. They worshiped many things, but not the true God. Abram would be a foreigner in this land which supposedly belonged to him, foreign in both culture and heritage. God was calling him to sacrifice his past for a future he could not yet hold.

Letting go of the past is a terrifying experience, isn't it? While God has not called any of us to move across the country to inherit a piece of land with enemies already squatting on it, we know that the future always feels uncertain. Sure, there are opportunities waiting out there, but there are also risks. As I watch my parents come into the stage of life where they are burying my grandparents, I'm confronted with the reality that I'll have to say goodbye to Mom and Dad someday. As I hold my son, the worrier in me pictures an empty chair with my name on it at his wedding. Is it overdramatic? Of course! Is it a lack of trust in God's control of the future? Yes! But the future is intimidating.

Faith moves us to sacrifice the past, not by taking us from one geographical location to another, but by leading us to place our hopes in what is to come instead of what has come. Abram could have stayed in his comfort zone, happy to hold onto what was already in his hands. But God promised him something greater: "I will make you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great. You will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse anyone who dishonors you. All of the families of the earth will be blessed in you." All promises. All things that would only come in the future. But Abram was certain in the future because God promised it. Hebrews 11 says, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance, and he left without knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as a stranger in the Promised Land, as if it did

not belong to him, dwelling in tents along with Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” Abram’s faith moved him to go because that faith was focused on God’s word of promise.

Your faith moves you to focus on God’s promises for the future as well. It’s why you can take a step forward in life, even when it’s intimidating, knowing God holds you in his hands. It’s why you can face the certainty of your own mortality without fear and dread, but with the assurance that the city built by God awaits you too. Your faith does not look backward, dwelling on the sinful past of your sinful self in this sinful world. Your faith looks forward, to when God’s promises will no longer just be promises but realities.

Finally, faith looks outward. I want you to notice what Abram got into the habit of doing as he left Haran. When he stopped, he often built an altar to God. We see two just in this section. The first he built in Shechem by the Oak of Moreh, most likely a pagan worship site. The second he built as he camped between Bethel and Ai. Why did he build them? Well, we’re told for the second one: “There he built an altar to the LORD and proclaimed the name of the LORD.” Who was he proclaiming the name of the Lord to with all these altars?

Abram was building the church. He was preaching through these altars. He was preaching to his family members traveling with him that were now surrounded by the paganism that reminded them of their worship back home and probably tempted them to return to that worship too. He was preaching to his neighbors that Abram’s God was different than their gods.

You think of all the promises God made for Abram in this section, and I think of the seven he makes in verses two and three, there are two that stand out to us most: “You will be a blessing” and “All of the families on earth will be blessed in you.” Abram’s family would grow into a great people. They would build a kingdom that would reflect the power and promises of God to the nations around them. And from that kingdom would come the fulfillment to the ultimate promise of God: a Messiah who would redeem the world from sin.

Abram’s faith certainly looked upward, to God who promised and was faithful. His faith also looked forward, to the fulfillment of God’s greatest blessing found in Jesus. But his faith also looked outward. It was living and active, as true faith always is. It looked not just to move the one who was given the faith, but to move many more to faith who did not have it yet.

You know that your faith is not just for you. God has given you this gift that you may proclaim his name to others. So, let me ask: what is the trail of altars you’re leaving in your wake? How are you, subtly or not so subtly, sharing God’s glory with those around you? Because at the end of your life, the greatest impact you have on the people you shared this world with will be how many of them heard and saw your faith on display. Let your faith move you, so that you too are looking upward, forward, and outward. Amen.