

Foundations: A New Hope
By Jason Huff
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Matthew 8:5-11; Galatians 3:6-9; Genesis 11:10-12:9

Our final Scripture for today is Genesis 11:10-12:9. Due to the material we're going to cover, we're going to start at verse 27, but I encourage you to read the entire passage this week. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "This is the account of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth. Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren; she had no children. Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran. The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev."

"It's the hope that kills you." The phrase is a cliché in the world of British football, which we would call soccer. The idea is that no one with low expectations is ever let down – but what's most painful is when you have your dreams dashed. If you expect to get beaten, if your favorite team is on a long losing streak, well, it's no big surprise. But your favorite team losing in overtime, in the 9th inning of the 7th game of the World Series – that hurts. There's a letdown when your favorite athlete is one place away from medaling in their sport. And if it's true in sports, it's even more true in life events that truly matter – when the raise doesn't come through, when the cancer comes back, when the rejection letter arrives in the mail. Our American equivalent of the thought is, "Don't get your hopes up."

And yet the Bible is a book full of hope. God is a God of hope. God presents opportunities where there are none to be had. God does the impossible on a regular basis. We may not get the fairy tale life in this world, yet God has told us about a world to come far better than this one. He's got our hopes up. And that hope rests on His truthfulness and faithfulness. And the real beginning of the story of hope starts with Abram.

As we've read the first eleven chapters of Genesis together, we've seen big hopes dashed. The first hope for humanity was Adam, who failed miserably when he committed the only possible sin against God he could. Abel, the good son, is murdered by his jealous brother Cain. The godly line of Seth eventually intermarries with Cain's line, and the result is a people so sinful that God floods the earth with only him and his family to start anew. Despite his faithfulness, Noah turns out not to be a savior figure either. The story of the tower of Babel last week proved that once again, humanity when left to its own devices continually sought to do evil. God had to separate us out to keep our sin from growing too great, too fast.

But finally we start to see some light coming through the family of Shem. Shem was the son blessed by Noah, and in the portion of Scripture we skipped over today, we are given a listing of Shem's descendants all the way to Terah, Abram's father. The genealogy doesn't suggest that they followed God; it doesn't call them righteous. But there's a key change – unlike the genealogies that came before it, there's no reminder that all the ancients died. It's just not there. It doesn't mean that they didn't die, only that now that we're to Shem's line, things are not as hopeless as they once seemed. From a literary point of view, the change suggests that hope is on the horizon.

But what is so unlikely is who that hope is going to come through. Many of us know parts of the story of Abram; we know he was old and his wife unable to have children. But because we know little about the ancient world, we don't realize the parts the Bible didn't have to explain to ancient readers but what we need some explanations for. What we don't realize is just how deep Abram's pagan roots are.

Because religion is a sore subject for many people today, we don't realize just how deeply entrenched ancient religious thoughts pervaded all sorts of societies. Ur of the Chaldeans was the absolute center of ancient moon worship, and Moses and Joshua were clear in their writings that their forefathers through Terah worshiped other gods. Abram's father name Terah is connected to the name of the lunar month. Sarai's name translated into Akkadian is the same as the moon god Nanna's wife. Milcah is Abram's sister in law, and her name is a title for the daughter of Nanna.¹ There's no doubt their family was engaged in this religion.

And Ur was famous for it. In Ur there was a famous ziggurat built with a silver shrine at the top for this god, and from that spot you could stargaze. There was palace and temples there dedicated to the various deities. The religion was a birth-to-death enterprise. An excavation about a hundred years ago found an ancient queen of Ur who was buried with 73 servants who were sacrificed to become her caretakers in the afterlife. This is the world Abram knew, a world of pagan rituals and sacrifices in a mighty city.

And God tells Abram to leave it all behind. And Abram is not given a firm destination or permanent plans. God says, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." God does not say, "Go to Canaan." God says, "I will show you where you will go." I don't go anywhere without my phone and Google Maps, and sometimes I even have a printout from MapQuest for backup. But the destination isn't the promise.

¹ "Chapter 20: From Shem to Abraham," *Genesis – Beginnings and Blessings*, R. Kent Hughes.

The promise God makes is that He will make Abram into a great nation, will make his name great, will bless him to be a blessing not only to others but to the whole world, that those who curse him will be cursed and those who bless him will be blessed. God makes the promise of a legacy to a man who has no sons, whose wife is barren and past child-bearing age. God gives Abram hope, and God promises hope for the future through him.

But it's a lot to give up. I had always kind of had it in my mind that Abram was just out in the middle of nowhere and God told him to move to a better place. Not a real question mark if you're a nomad in the middle of nowhere. But Ur was somewhere. In the ancient world, it was a place of renown, a city with its comforts. Everyone knew their gods and their place in society. It would have been comfortable. Abram is not just moving from a patch of dirt to a land flowing with milk and honey. He is moving from the well-known into the completely unknown.

That leads us to something for us to contemplate: *what is our willingness to follow God into the unknown?* While God promised Abram a great deal, God's command was one of complete trust. Let me lead you, God says to Abram. Let me get you where you're supposed to go. Abram first moves to Haran, kind of the edge of what he knows, still a center of moon worship, and perhaps the last place his father is willing to travel before his death. But then God sends him out from there, past the reaches of Abram's comfort zone. He'd already traveled 600 miles to Haran, but Canaan is another 400 miles. Before Abram gets to where God wants him, he's traveled a thousand miles on the basis of God's promise.

The truth is, we aren't much for the unknown. We like the comfortable and familiar, which is why the pandemic was so hard on us. We buy insurance to protect ourselves against the unexpected. To do anything remotely hazardous, we have to sign a waiver – just yesterday, we had to sign waivers to participate in a walk around the zoo! The only time we're willing to step into the unknown is when what we do know has become intolerable. We choose the unknown when there seems to be no other choice.

But God isn't all that concerned about human ideas of safety and security. As the quote goes, "The safest place to be is in the center of God's will." All the insurance in the world won't stop a tragedy; a waiver just protects people from being sued, not from harm. But God promises something different. He promises eternal security. And what's more, He often gives us far more than that. His blessings on Abram continue to the present day. He blesses those who are willing to step out in faith. He blesses those who will trust in Him over a nice house and a big car and Allstate and State Farm.

There are a few things that get in our way. The first is the question of whether or not God is actually our Lord. We call Jesus our Lord and Savior, but the term "lord" doesn't mean we get to choose our own marching orders. It implies that God has authority over us and can tell us what we should do. To be blunt, if you aren't interested in God's instructions and God's ways, if you just don't care, He's not your Lord and thus not your Savior. We may struggle with what comes next, but the true Christian understands and believes that God has the right to command our destiny.

The second thing that gets in the way is trust. We might truly want Christ as Lord, we want to follow Him, but we aren't sure that God's ways will work out for the best. Especially because in the immediate, God's plans often seem counter-productive to our best. Whether that's moving somewhere far from what we know or loving our enemies, whether it's showing hospitality to the stranger or giving generously to the poor, most of what God asks us to do is not immediately beneficial to us.

We have to trust that God will bless those who trust Him and do what He asks when He asks it of us. As Bible scholar Kurt Strassner put it, “[Abraham] went forward, not because it made sense; not because it was easy; not because it seemed the most feasible way to raise a family; but simply because God said so! That is the essence of faith - obedience to God's commandments even when we don't know what obedience will bring.”²

And that's the other thing we have to watch out for – our own counterarguments and excuses why we shouldn't do what God tells us. Many years ago, when my friend Mark Dinnage first called me up and told me I was going on a year-long mission with him to Russia with him because God told him so in prayer, in the back of my mind, I was like, “You're crazy!” I had two years left of college. I was interested in dating Catha. I had my own plans to accomplish. I was going to work in radio, not become a missionary. I had so many excuses. And it wasn't until God answered my prayers in a very direct way that I put all those counterarguments aside.

Will every dollar you give away get used the way you think is wise? Probably not. Do it anyway. Will your enemies love you because you prayed for them? Probably not. Do it anyway. Will the person you show hospitality return the favor? Probably not. Do it anyway. Will the person we give groceries to show us gratitude? Probably not. Do it anyway. Because God asks it of us.

We might think, “God hasn't asked me to follow Him into the unknown. He's never asked me to move to a new place or a new job.” Maybe God has never asked anything of you directly in prayer. But He has asked you to follow Him into the unknown through His Word to us. In Scripture, Jesus has taught us what it is to be His disciple...to give without trumpeting it to the neighbors, to pray when no one is looking, to forgive the unforgivable, to love the unlovable. Those are the ways God is calling each of us to obedience.

Always remember, though, that the LORD doesn't command that which we cannot do through the power of the Holy Spirit. We can boldly follow Him because God has made it possible. And God has promised blessings on those who will trust His son, even eternal life. We won't do it perfectly; we will struggle with obedience as long as we live. But it is not a pipe dream. We simply need to examine ourselves and ask, “Am I willing?” And if we're not, it doesn't need to be a permanent problem. We simply need to pray and ask God, “Where might you have me follow you more closely?”

² Strassner, K. (2009). *Opening up Genesis* (p. 62). Leominster: Day One Publications.

Let's move on to the final part of the passage. After Terah dies, Abram, his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all with them head out to Canaan. There's a curiosity in the passage where it talks about bringing with them "the people they had acquired in Haran." The wording here could simply mean people employed as indentured servants. That's the most likely understanding. But because of the way it's phrased, many ancient rabbis and some modern commentaries agree that these are people Abram had won over to God. Just as Abram was placing his future in the hands of YHWH, these folks were willing placing their lives in Abram's hands, trusting him and his knowledge of the one true God.

When Abram arrives in Canaan at Shechem, there God appears and tells him, this is the land your offspring will receive from me. But even then, God doesn't stay, "settle here now." He continues through all of Canaan and goes down towards Egypt, even more mileage. And at two stops along the way, Abram builds altars to the LORD. Keep in mind that Abram has this entire entourage with him. He is making a community statement – we worship the LORD, YHWH. He does not build a monument or a city or a ziggurat like the people that came before. He does not build something that others could look back upon and say, "Look what Abram did." Abram makes his faith public before his people and the peoples of Canaan. Abram is keeping no secrets about the God he serves.

And that's our second and final thought for the day: *do the people who know you know Who you trust?* When I was growing up, I was told that there were two things you didn't talk about in polite company – religion and politics. Then I grew up and Facebook arrived and we all realized why we didn't talk about religion and politics. There's nothing that gets people more upset than finding out someone disagrees with them on these two issues.

But more than ever, people need to know Who we trust, that we are believers in the God of Abram and God's Son, Jesus Christ. It's not about putting up signs or wearing T-shirts or posting memes on social media. It's that when someone knows you, they know you know Christ. It's not just about what you say, because plenty of people have a lot of crazy, unbiblical thoughts they say about Jesus, and plenty of people want nothing to do with Jesus because of those crazy, unbiblical thoughts. It's about living in a way that your life reflects Jesus.

In today's world, you are the Jesus people will see. They will not read the Bible. They will not listen to preachers on the Internet, even solid biblical teachers. They have been steeped in secular humanism. But when you live differently, talk differently, act differently...when you live with kindness, talk with patience, act with compassion...secular humanism talks about these things but rarely practices them. When you live as a Christian, you will stand out. You have the chance to minister to others, whether God calls you far away like Abram or right at your work desk or at the counter at the diner with a cup of coffee and a neighbor. Abram not only trusted God, others knew that he trusted God by his actions. May it be so for us as well.

In a couple weeks, we'll return to Abram and learn about one of his many grand failures that points to God's mercy in the midst of our bad choices. But for now, live as a disciple of Jesus. Trust in the promises He makes to us of eternal life with Him that begins even now. Because when you believe in God and trust in His Son Jesus, God even now calls you a spiritual daughter, a spiritual son, of Abraham – the man Abram will become.