

TRUST AND OBEY

SERIES: LEARNING TO LIVE BY FAITH
By Steve Zeisler

“Now the LORD said to Abram,
‘Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father’s house,
To the land which I will show you....’”
(Genesis 12:1.)

This sentence is a record of one of the most important moments in history. Four thousand years ago, this word from the Lord began salvation’s story, identifying a people for God’s name and preparing the world for the birth of Messiah. But Abram didn’t know any of that at the time he was called. What the Scriptures highlight in the New Testament and later books of the Old Testament when they look back at Abraham is his willingness to trust God without knowing what the outcome would be, without knowing the plan that God had initiated. It is his faith that we are called to learn from, to be inspired by, and to choose ourselves in our time and place.

Hebrews 11 gives an extended discussion of Abraham’s faith. We’re going to devote three messages to this part of chapter 11. We’ll consider not only Abraham’s influence and historic significance, but the choices he made along the way to trust God.

Our text divides into three sections that each begin with the phrase “by faith.” The first section has to do with hearing and obeying, the second with life in tents, and the third with the peculiar timing of God. Hebrews 11:8-12:

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore there was born even of one man, and he as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

Let’s look at the first of these three sections.

The call of God

Verse 8: “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.” God’s entrance into our experience, breaking through our ordinary circle of events and decisions, will always

bring change. He calls on us to follow. And he doesn't explain where the journey will take us. He doesn't give us a map ahead of time.

How does the business of hearing and obeying work? Maybe your experience is that it's sometimes difficult to hear God. Sometimes the difficulty is in obeying God. I think once we consider these two properly, we'll realize that they always go together. Nobody really hears God well unless they are predisposed to obey him. In our obedience we become better and better at hearing what he says.

Of course, not everyone has the same assignment. Some may be called to serve in familiar surroundings, others to travel long distances. Some are called to take new risks in relationships that already exist, some are called to begin new relationships. Abraham was called to leave Mesopotamia. In the last message (Discovery Paper 5242) we talked about Noah, who was called to stay in one place decade after decade and be true as a witness. God has a different assignment for each of us, and our hope is to be those who hear better and obey more fully and have the excitement of living lives that are pleasing to God.

I remember trying as a new Christian to apply skills that I had learned before I came to faith in Christ. I had learned that people like you when you meet their expectations. I also had a certain sense of what my duties were, and I wanted to discharge them. When I became a Christian, I more or less lived my life as if doing one's duty was the main thing, although I had acquired a new set of duties. But over time I have learned that pleasing people and discharging manmade responsibilities does not equal Christian discipleship.

God communicates his will for us in the language of love. When he calls us to a place or to a response, opens a door that he wants us to go through, it will have about it his love for us. The discovery of the will of God, if we were to use that phrase, will have in it his approval, his embrace. God also speaks through love in giving us a burden, or a concern, for people. He will give us a burden to speak the truth where truth has not been spoken. God's call for you, the adventure you should be on, is about what God has given you love for, the things that matter to you because they matter to him. That is how we discover the door that he's opened.

We hear and obey; and the more we obey, the better we hear, and the better we hear, the more we obey. These two reinforce each other. Abraham heard God speak and he embarked on a journey. God is speaking to us about a place he has for us, an opportunity he has for us, gifts he has for us, and nothing in the world is better than making that discovery and acting on it.

The second section of our text is about the problem of living in tents.

Temporary situations

Verses 9-10: "By faith he [Abraham] lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Verse 10 introduces a subject that we're going to take up later. One of the effects of dwelling as an alien in

the land of promise, living in tents in a place you've been given, is that it makes you long for what is permanent. That will be the topic of the next message.

But living in tents in the Promised Land is also about our experience right now. God said to Abraham and Sarah and their offspring that he, the Lord, the Maker of everything, had granted them the deed to a particular parcel of earth. They dwelt in their own land where they were supposed to, but they always lived in tents, impermanent structures, wandering from place to place. They were nomads in the land that God had given to them.

What are we supposed to learn from this? We're living the same kind of life. There are promises that we can claim, but not yet fully experience. We have been given everything we need, but not everything we want.

My father-in-law used to tell of an experience in his childhood. He grew up in Oakland, and his folks would take him and his sister to Yosemite every summer. His father would pitch a tent alongside the Merced River, and they would camp there for the whole summer. There were hundreds of other families who did the same thing, year after year. The children grew up together. The fathers would go back to the city during the week and work at their jobs, and on the weekends they would rejoin their families in Yosemite. So these children grew up spending every summer living in tents in Yosemite Valley.

Now, there are two ways to look at this. You could say, "It would really be great if we owned Yosemite and could build a permanent house there." Or you could say, "It's a great gift to spend a summer in Yosemite, even though it's only temporary." That's the point the writer of Hebrews is making in verse 9. Even though we don't have everything we want or everything we will have someday, what we have been given is extremely valuable. We look forward to permanence and find purpose, even joy, in what remains temporary for now.

I spent a few days with Dan and Judy Van Elderen not long ago. The Van Elderens are strong contributors to the life of this church. They had a baby named Jesse living with them—their forty-fifth foster child. Jesse was about four months old. They got him directly from the hospital when he was born. We were reflecting one evening on the business of loving foster children. And I realized from talking to them that the most difficult thing is not the inconvenience. Babies keep you up at night. They need their diapers changed. They restrict what you can do. They require you to live life on their schedule, not yours. But the most difficult thing is that Dan and Judy fall in love with these children. After four months with Jesse, they have set themselves up to get their hearts broken. Because the foster care system is what it is, the most likely outcome for Jesse is not necessarily the best. Children who get into the foster care system usually have a lot of chaos in their family life, and you can't predict that they're going to end up in a good place.

So the question is, is loving someone who will leave worth it? Is the risk you take to give your life away, even knowing there's going to be some heartbreak afterward, and not knowing how connected you'll be with the child in the future, worth it? The answer is yes.

We're living in tents. Things are going to change. The tent flaps will come loose, the rain will get in, the wind will blow, the world is not the way it ought to be. Is it worth it to invest ourselves in truth God gives us to speak, and love God gives us to share, and fellowship that isn't going to be perfect, and building families that have chaos and difficulty? Is throwing ourselves into this life worth it? The answer is yes, because God is in it. It's impermanent, but it's going to be increasingly filled with God's presence.

That's the heart of the second section of our text. Abraham and Sarah lived in tents because God had directed them to. They were in the place they ought to be, serving the One they ought to serve, and he took the choices they made and wove them into a beautiful tapestry. He takes the obedience we offer and makes something of it that's eternal. He will build on choices we make in ways that we'll never see and couldn't possibly understand, to accomplish things that we will not live long enough to know about.

The world won't satisfy us completely. Our marriages will be less than we wish they were sometimes. Our children will grow up and have lives that are different from what we might have imagined for them. Our elderly parents will grow feebler. The people we love, even the church we're part of, will change. But it's really cool to be able to live in tents in Yosemite for the summer. We can live with enthusiasm amidst impermanence because God is with us and his purposes are being worked out.

The third section of our text is verses 11-12.

Unpredictable timing

“By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore, there was born even of one man, and he as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.” Most of us begin thinking about life with the illusion of predictability: grade school is followed by junior high and then high school. After that you go to college. Then you get a job. Then you get married. And then you have children. There's this trajectory, this timing, that we're taught to expect.

But no one experiences life without surprises and detours. Things don't happen at the right time. Finding someone to love proves more difficult than we expected. Or we think that our job is progressing so that we're going to be promoted, and we get fired. Plans for an enjoyable retirement are challenged by unexpected health problems. Over and over again we realize that the timing of events in our lives does not conform to our expectations.

The timing of things got out of whack in spades for Abraham and Sarah. The promise God made to them was that they would have a child from both their bodies, and that child would be the founder of a great nation. And there was no child. And there was no child. And there was still no child. So they tried to intervene on their own and life took a turn for the worse. They were trying to trust God and they couldn't. At long last they did have the promised child. But babies are supposed to come before menopause in the natural trajectory of things, and late in life they were taught an important lesson.

God has the right to not meet our expectations, to break the pattern. In fact, we learn the most about ourselves and God and life when things go wrong. Our capabilities prove inadequate. We learn that his ways are not our ways, but his ways are better, and he can be trusted. Even beyond the proper time of life, even when it was impossible, God kept his promises, and Abraham and Sarah learned that he could be trusted in every way.

I want to conclude by reading from a blog by Caren McCormack. Caren and her husband Jon are also active and at the heart of the life of this church. They have a daughter of their own, and recently adopted a second child from Russia, named Emma. Emma is three years old. Within a few days of returning to the U.S. with their new daughter, Caren discovered that she had acute myelogenous leukemia (MLA). This child they adopted, and their own daughter, now may not have a mother. She is in the hospital and it is very hard to understand what God is doing. But this is something Caren recently wrote:

“As Jon and I have struggled with the news of my prognosis and the length of my treatment, it is hard to understand God’s plans for the long term. But what I prayed for last night was ability to live in the now. We have too many “what ifs” in the months ahead. We need to focus on each day and each week as it comes. What I do know is that God is good. He has met me and my family in countless moments in the last few weeks, and I have faith that he will continue to do so.

‘Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
I say to myself, “The LORD is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him.”’ (1)

Praying for “ability to live in the now” is the essence of life in a tent. God will answer the prayer in his own way, a faith-building way.

Notes

1. *McCormack Family Blog*, available at <http://jonmccormack.wordpress.com>: internet.

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Fourth Message

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