

“Go Where I Will Show You,” Genesis 11:27-12:9 (Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost, September 9, 2018)

²⁷ Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. ²⁸ Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. ²⁹ And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram’s wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor’s wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. ³⁰ Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

³¹ Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram’s wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. ³² The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran.

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵ And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. ⁹ And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

PRAY

We are starting a new series on Sunday mornings this fall on the life of Abraham. Abraham is called Abram at this point in the Bible, so don’t let that throw you – Abram means “exalted father” and Abraham means “father of nations”. He’s also a key figure in three world religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Adherents of each of those faiths consider themselves children of Abraham.

Abraham lived in what we now call the Middle East about four thousand years ago, and what he is best known for, what the New Testament holds him out as an exemplar of, is his faith. Four times in the New Testament Genesis 15:6 is quoted. That verse says, “And [Abraham] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” The way Abraham stood righteous before God, as having been approved by God, was by his faith.

Hebrews 11:6 says, “And without faith it is impossible to please him [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” This

verse tells us there is literally nothing more important than that you have faith in God. And that's what we'll look at this morning. *First, we'll look at the cost of faith. Second, we'll look at the hope in faith.*

First, the cost of faith. Last fall we studied Genesis 1-11 and we saw how God created the heavens and the earth, how he created the first human beings, Adam and Eve. We saw the fall of man when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, and we saw the rapid descent of all mankind into near complete and total depravity. This led to God judging mankind by sending a great flood, killing off everyone except for one righteous man, Noah, his wife, his sons and his daughters-in-law. In Genesis 10 and 11 we read how the descendants of Noah begin to repopulate the earth, until we get to our text for today where we read about Terah, the father of Abraham.

He lived in Ur of the Chaldeans, which was probably located in what is now modern-day Iraq. But Terah did not know the Lord. He was, the book of Joshua tells us, an idolator. Ur was the center of the worship of the moon, and the name Terah probably comes from an ancient word meaning "moon."

So here's the situation as we open Genesis 12: no one left on earth knows the Lord, the creator God, personally. No one knows why human beings exist. No one knows how to live. No one knows the purpose and meaning of life. The last light of the knowledge of the Lord has been extinguished.

It's a grim situation. But then we read Genesis 12:1: "Now the LORD said to Abram ..." The knowledge of the Lord had been lost among the people of the earth, but God refused to leave himself without a witness. He spoke to Abraham and revealed himself to him. And Abraham heard God. The light of the knowledge of God was rekindled on the earth.

But it's enough just to hear the call of God; as we've already said what made Abraham great is not just that he heard God *but that he trusted him*. Abraham believed in God and God credited it to him as righteousness.

But it cost Abraham to believe in God, and when we see what it cost him it will help us understand what it will cost us to trust him. It cost Abraham two things: *first, he had to leave everything he knew behind.*

This is all of verse one: "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" Genesis 12:1. Abraham, in order to have faith in God, had to trust him enough to leave his home and his father's family behind and strike out for a land God would show him. Abraham had to leave everything he'd ever known if he was to trust God.

Now, that doesn't sound like a big deal to us because we do that all the time. Just about everyone in Oxford left their hometown to come here. It seems like no one at Grace Bible grew up in Oxford. Abraham traveled 400 miles to move from his father's house in Haran to go to

where God called him in Shechem, but some of you have come a lot further than 400 miles to come to Oxford. So why does the Bible make such a big deal about Abraham's faith?

Because we live in an incredibly individualistic culture where it's romantic, it's an adventure, to strike off on your own and build a life for yourself. It's the American way. Not four thousand years ago in Israel. Your extended family meant everything in that culture. To leave them behind and start a life for yourself would have been unthinkable then.

But, you may say, what about verse 5? "And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan." Abraham wasn't all by himself – he may have left his extended family behind but he still took his wife and his nephew with him.

Yes, but then we read this in verse 30: "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child." Sarai, later her name is changed to Sarah, was not going to provide any children for Abraham, and to be childless in that culture meant you considered yourself to be under the curse of God.

In order to have faith in God Abraham had to leave everything that could have possibly mattered to him behind when God called him to move, and as far as he knew at 75 years old what he did take with him was destined to die and rot. He could have no children, so Abraham literally left life behind in Haran when he followed God to Canaan. For Abraham trusting God meant embarking on a life that could only be described as a living death.

If you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, welcome. We are so glad you're here. And I certainly hope you want to become a Christian. But if you do you have to know one thing: before you can ever become a Christian you must be ready to die.

I don't mean suicide. Take your own life in that way has nothing to do with Christianity. What I mean is this: before you can ever be a Christian ***you've got to die to the notion that you can or ever will have your life figured out.***

We are all tempted to think that we know what needs to happen in our lives. We have a plan for how our lives should go. We think we know what we need to do, and we look at the people around us and we think we know what they need to do for us. We believe what we want is what is best and that if we just follow our hearts everything will work out.

But what marks every mature Christian is we realize that we really don't know any of that and we certainly don't trust our desires. Mature Christians are instead marked by a profound humility about life that comes from acknowledging our sin.

We are sinners, which means that we are all so fundamentally messed up that we dare not trust our plans, our thoughts, or our reasoning. Christians know we have incredible capacities for self-deception and we simply can't trust ourselves. So we must die to all that and instead pray to God and say, "I have made a mess of my life, or I will make a mess of my life. Sin has infected every part of my being, so I can't trust my heart, my instincts, or my intellect. I can't even let my conscience be my guide; it's broken, too. I thought sex would bring me happiness, and it didn't.

I thought money would bring me happiness, and it hasn't. I thought success in my career where everyone looked up to me would bring me happiness, now I believe it won't. So God, I turn my life over to you. I leave everything I've ever known about living life behind and I'm committed to following you wherever you lead." Until you say that to God, you'll never be a Christian.

But you can only do that at great cost. You're giving up the right to control your life when you become a Christian. When God says in the Bible, "Do this" or "don't do that," then you must obey. And it will cost you. It's not for no reason that Jesus says this in Luke 14: "Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, "This man began to build and was not able to finish." ³¹ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.'" Luke 14:25-33. Unsurprisingly, people stopped following Jesus when he said things like that – that's one cost of faith.

Second, in order to trust God Abraham had to encounter many obstacles. "When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land." Genesis 12:5b-6.

God calls Abraham and says, "Abraham, I'm going to give you this land for you and your descendants one day. Come, and let me show you." So Abraham caravans the 400 miles south to Shechem and when he gets there what does he find? Thousands of Canaanites who already live there! Thousands of warlike pagans who probably aren't going to be too keen to let Abraham have this land. In fact, we read in verse eight that Abraham set up camp on the top of a barren hill between Bethel and Ai. You know why? Because Abraham was scared of the people who live in Bethel and Ai.

You have to believe Abraham looked at all the houses down in Bethel and Ai, all the smoke rising up from the chimneys, all the men sitting in the town squares talking, and he was tempted to doubt God and say, "How in the world will I ever get this land for myself?"

One of the biggest misunderstandings people have about faith is they think that if they just have enough of it their life will be easy. They more faith you have, the fewer obstacles there will be to get in your way. The formula is: you have faith, so God is happy with you, so life is easier.

It's not true! Abraham had more faith than any of us will. He is the father of nations, the exemplar of faith in the Bible. But he faced obstacle after obstacle. First, he sees the land he's promised is full of Canaanites who probably aren't going to give him the land. Second, his wife is barren – how can he become a great nation without any children? And third, as we'll see in chapter 22, once Abraham does get a son God then tells Abraham to sacrifice his son on an altar.

So you can't say, "If I just believe in God enough, if I just have enough faith, my life will be easy. My faith can drive out the obstacles." The apostle Paul had great faith, but at one point he wrote this: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?" Romans 8:35. Paul means that those things are real possibilities for him and all who believe. They weren't meaningless hypotheticals. In fact, all those things did happen to Paul at one point or another.

Being a Christian will not exempt you from hardships in life, not matter how much faith you have. It may be that being a Christian brings you more heartache in this life than non-Christians experience.

It costs a lot to have faith in God, and faith doesn't guarantee you a good life. Now, does anyone want to be a Christian now? Have I made it look sufficiently hard? Good. Now we're ready for the second point. We've seen the cost of faith. Now, we'll look at second, the hope in faith.

What is the hope in faith? Well, what was Abraham hoping for? "2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Genesis 12:2-3.

Abraham had faith in God because he believed God when he promised him all those things. But what do you notice about all those promises? They would all only be fulfilled for Abraham in the future – indeed, not until long after Abraham died would they be fulfilled.

Abraham never saw any of those promises delivered in his life. Instead, as Derek Kidner puts it in his wonderful little commentary on the book of Genesis, in order to have faith in God Abraham had to exchange what the known for the unknown. Abraham had to find his reward in what he could not live to see (that he would become a great nation), in what was intangible (that he would have a great name), and in what he would impart (that he would be a blessing to all the peoples on the earth).

If Christian faith in God is ever going to make sense to you, you have to understand this: you cannot put your ultimate hope in anything that might happen to you or for you in this life. You can't put your hope in a marriage, or in children, or in your career, or in anything else.

Yes, you may make it to a ripe old age and look back on all those things and say, "Everything turned out great." And if that happens for you, praise God! That is God's mercy on your life.

But it's not promised to you. The hope in faith is not that this life will go well for us. Maybe your life will be easy. Maybe it will be smooth sailing all the way through. Or maybe your life will turn out to be incredibly difficult. Maybe you will encounter such suffering that people look at you the way people looked at Job in the Old Testament and say, "What in the world did you do to bring all this pain on yourself? How can you even bear to live?" Probably what will happen for a lot of you is that your life will turn out great but you'll always be worried about something going wrong and you never really know what God is up to.

But when you learn not to put your hope in anything in this life, then Abraham's example can really help you. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God." Hebrews 11:8-10.

Your hope must not be for anything in this life – ***you must look forward to the city that is to come***. Sometimes this city is called Zion in the Bible, sometimes it's called the New Jerusalem, sometimes it's just called heaven.

But there you will see God face to face. You will be reunited with loved ones. And all the obstacles that you encounter in this life and that caused you pain and suffering – they are forbidden there. God himself will destroy them. A couple of different places in the Bible say God will wipe away every tear there.

The book of Isaiah describes life in that city like this: "And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." Isaiah 35:10.

Hebrews 11:1 says, "Faith is being sure of what you hope for and certain of what you cannot see." If you know with certainty that one day that will be you – standing with all the redeemed in the city of Zion with everlasting joy upon your head and sorrow and sighing fleeing away – if you have enough faith in God to believe more than anything else that will happen, ***then you can stand anything in this life***. If you can be sure of that city, you can enjoy the good things you receive in life and hold onto them loosely, and when the bad times come you can stand. ***The cost of faith will not be too much to pay***.

And that is the faith God calls you to have. Not that everything will turn out like you hope here in this life (that's not promised you), but that you God will enable to you stand and be glad in Zion in the next (because that is).

You say, "How can I know this? How can I believe this?" If you're here today and you're not a Christian but you're ready to admit you can't run your life, you've made a mess of it and you don't trust yourself anymore about what you need or where your desires are leading you, how can you in particular believe this?

Galatians 3:7-8 tells us. There the apostle Paul quotes Genesis 12:3 and he says, "Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, ***preached the gospel*** beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'"

Gospel means "good news," and the good news of the Bible is that God became a man in Jesus Christ, and Jesus walked and lived a perfect life on earth – he never sinned, so he could trust

himself with his desires. He was God, so he really did know what was best and what other people needed to do.

But even though he was God he didn't use his rights as God. Instead, he gave them all up to die on a Roman cross. He did that because that's what we deserve – we deserve death because we've sinned and we've offended God.

But then God raised Jesus from the dead as proof that he accepts Jesus sacrifice on the cross in our place – Jesus' resurrection proves that Jesus wasn't dying for his own sins (after all, he didn't have any) but for ours.

And at the very end of his life Jesus told his followers this: “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe [have faith] in God; believe also in me. ²In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” John 14:1-3.

You can know you will stand in Zion, in the New Jerusalem, in the heavenly city – free from suffering, covered in joy – when you believe, have faith, that Jesus Christ died for your sins, he was raised from the dead, and is himself there in the city that is to come preparing a place for you. That is the Christian hope.

But not all the promises God makes are for the future. Some are fulfilled right now. And one promise in particular he gives us to strengthen our faith so we can stand firm until the end. Mark 10:28-30: “Peter began to say to him, ‘See, we have left everything and followed you.’” Peter's telling Jesus, “Look, we and the other disciples have faith – look at all we've left behind, just like Abraham.” “Jesus said, ‘Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.’”

Jesus says no matter what you may have to leave behind to follow me (and it may be quite a lot – it may involve your family, your career, everything you've know), you can be sure that I won't leave you alone. You'll have the church. And by that I don't mean a building, nor do I mean you'll have access to a formal worship service like this. As important as I think this is, and as much work as we all put into this gathering each week, this isn't the promise.

The promise, Jesus says, is that no matter who you leave behind to follow God in faith you'll have other believers who will be there for you. When times are great, they'll remind you to hold onto the blessings from God loosely and use them to serve others. And when times are hard and the obstacles stand in your way, they'll be there to cheer you on, to meet your needs, and to remind you to hold fast for the city that is to come.

Do you have a group of believers in your life like that? That's the whole point of the Grace Group ministry at our church. If you're not in one get in one.

God commands that you have faith in him. It is the only way you can relate to him. Avail yourself of the resources he promises you now to sustain your faith as you wait for the hope of your faith in God through Jesus Christ to be revealed – the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. PRAY