



ONE NOMAD'S
AMAZING JOURNEY OF FAITH

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CHARLES R.
SWINDOLL



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Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois

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Abraham: One Nomad's Amazing Journey of Faith

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Designed by Ron Kaufmann

Edited by Stephanie Rische

Published in association with Yates & Yates, LLP (www.yates2.com).

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Swindoll, Charles R.

Abraham : one nomad's amazing journey of faith / Charles R. Swindoll.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4143-8063-6 (hc)

1. Abraham (Biblical patriarch) I. Title.

BS580.A3S95 2014

222'.11092—dc23

2014014348

ISBN 978-1-4964-0106-9 (International Trade Paper Edition)

Printed in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 15 14
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

One of the greatest joys and fulfillments of my life is serving as the senior pastor of Stonebriar Community Church, which I founded back in October 1998. I am amazed at the growth, the breadth, the depth, and the strength of this unique body. Only our awesome God could have made possible the many pieces that now shape and sustain this ministry. God—and God alone—deserves all the praise and all the glory.

I am especially grateful for those who faithfully serve as fellow elders. These individuals assist our pastors and staff in keeping everything in proper perspective. They faithfully pray and serve without public applause. They provide helpful oversight without self-serving agendas. And they make wise decisions without hidden or legalistic motives. It is a distinct privilege to serve alongside these men who model what it means to be godly, gracious servant leaders and who love Christ and His people.

With gratitude and deep respect, I dedicate this book to these ten men: Jim Byrd, Ralph Ehren, Jim Goodyear, Jim Gunn, Dave Hammock, Jay Madden, Sam Mathai, Russell Patterson, Steve Raffaele, and Stan Toussaint.

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INTRODUCTION

OLIVER CROMWELL, a seventeenth-century English soldier and statesman, became renowned for his authenticity and transparency. Once, when exasperated with the rigors of politics and annoyed by his peers, he stood before them in Parliament and said, “I would have been glad to have lived under my wood side, to have kept a flock of sheep, rather than undertook such a government as this is.”¹ Later, when sitting for a portrait, Cromwell reportedly told the painter, “Mr. Lilly I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me & not Flatter me at all. But remark all these ruffness, pimples warts & everything as you see me. Otherwise I never will pay a farthing for it.”²

I admire people who are authentic and transparent, and I enjoy biographies that paint historical figures as they really were. Put those two qualities together in a single binding, and I won't be able to put it down. Don't give me the whitewashed version of a person's life. I want people painted as they were, “pimples, warts, and everything.”

That's the way the Bible portrays *all* of its characters. Scripture doesn't presume to tell fairy tales. It's a book about real life, showing

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real people going through real experiences in a real world. It tells us the unvarnished truth about its heroes, even when that truth proves to be uncomfortable or unappealing. When you see lives portrayed, you get the whole story—no phony-baloney stuff, no airbrushed models. Each of the men and women in the Bible is like Elijah, whom the apostle James described as “a man with a nature like ours” (James 5:17, NASB).

The Bible tells us the stories of these people because we are like them, and their experiences help us understand ourselves, our needs, and our relationships with God. The same can be said of biographies in general, but it’s especially true of biographies about historical figures in Scripture, which may explain why I have written so many of them. I believe a close examination of a person’s life—particularly an individual who helped shape our world today—can be one of the best investments of our time when reading. Consequently, there’s rarely a time when I’m not reading a biography.

Having read so many biographies, I have discovered that many things in life are cyclical; history repeats itself. I gain wisdom by learning how another person got through a difficult time. How a great man or woman responded to criticism. How an individual, while honored and celebrated, avoided the ego trap of arrogance or conceit.

I have come to realize there are at least four benefits I receive from studying biographies.

A good biography translates truth into life.

Theological discussions can be boring or too theoretical. The truths discussed might be valid, but they can become awfully sterile and abstract. Like plants, theological truths belong in the dirt. Biblical truth thrives in the soil of real life, where it bursts to life, blooms, and bears fruit. One of my mentors, Dr. Howard Hendricks, used to challenge his students with the command “Incarnate the truth.” To *incarnate* is to make something become flesh. Don’t merely discuss the truth; make the truth become living flesh so that others might be drawn to the Author of truth.

For example, I could preach or write a series on suffering. People would likely listen or read and do their best to stay interested, yet nothing much would change. However, when I wrote a biography on Job, the truth about suffering came to life. Readers connected with this authentic account of suffering, and it resonated with their own experiences. That's because a biography incarnates biblical, theological truth.

A good biography creates a closer kinship with people we have admired from a distance.

When we study the life of a person in the Bible, we feel like we've met a friend. And that friendship can become remarkably intimate. If you read a biography with some imagination, placing yourself into the subject's world, you begin to feel a oneness with him or her—even someone as extraordinary as a prophet like Elijah or a leader like Moses or a courageous lady like Esther. All of a sudden you feel a kinship with that individual, a friendship filled with respect and gratitude.

A good biography offers stability when we go through similar experiences.

If you're a student of the life of David, you realize you're not alone when you lose your baby. His infant son, still in diapers, died after a short but intense illness. Or maybe you work for an impossible boss—someone emotionally unbalanced who somehow maintains a position of power. In his young-adult years, David served King Saul, who became insanely paranoid and obsessively haunted David's life for more than twelve years. Study David's experiences during the transitional period between the ages of seventeen and thirty, before he took the throne of Israel, and you'll appreciate how to deal with an oppressive superior.

Maybe you have a strained relationship with your mother. So did Esau. His biography will provide insight. Or if you find yourself at odds with a coworker or perhaps another Christian, study the lives of Barnabas and Paul, who stood toe-to-toe on an issue, each

refusing to back down. They separated over the disagreement and never worked together again. Sometimes a conflict doesn't reconcile. A study of their lives will help us learn how to disagree as mature Christians.

A good biography helps us maintain a divine perspective on life.

When we rub shoulders with a person in the Scriptures, we gain a much broader view of our circumstances. It's easy for many of us to become worriers, to feel burdened by failure. Study the life of Peter, and you discover a man driven by his own emotions. Impulsive to a fault, he spoke without thinking and leaped without looking—habits that led him to deny his Lord on three separate occasions during the most difficult period of Jesus' life on earth. You'll find encouragement when you see how the Lord restored His fallen friend and how Peter rose above that awful failure.

So why Abraham? What does the life of an ancient nomad have to do with ours?

In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of what some have called "radical atheism," led by authors like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens. They don't simply reject the existence of God; they aggressively attack belief in God as an evil that must be eradicated. Some worry about where this trend will take our twenty-first-century Western civilization. I *don't* worry. While the movement might be radical, it's certainly nothing new. And besides, I peeked ahead to see how the story of humanity ends. Spoiler alert: God wins.

So, with the issue of victory settled, the question becomes, How do we, as believers in a Creator God, conduct ourselves in a world that does not accept His existence as truth?

If we rewind history back far enough, we discover a time in which virtually no one believed in God. Civilizations worshiped many gods of their own invention, and they concocted extreme superstitions to explain the unexplainable, but they didn't acknowledge the existence of one true Creator of all things. Out of this mass of theologically

aimless humanity, one man emerged who began to proclaim what we might call “radical theism.” The man we know today as Abraham not only claimed that one true Creator existed and that all other gods did not, but he also staked his entire life on this belief.

Today this man is revered by the majority of the world as the “father of faith.”³ His story is preserved in Genesis, and it tells us much of what we need to know about faith. While each person’s faith journey is unique, Abraham blazed a trail for the rest of us; his faith journey tells us about our own. The biography of Abraham has much to teach anyone—even an atheist—who wants to know the one true Creator.

While each person’s faith journey is unique, Abraham blazed a trail for the rest of us; his faith journey tells us about our own.

Abraham’s story doesn’t appear in Genesis until nearly one-quarter of the way through the book. By the time readers meet Abraham, they have learned a great deal about God. So it seems only right that we know something about Him as well. For the sake of time, let me summarize what the Bible reveals about God.

First, the God of the Bible is the only deity in existence. He is not one of many; there is one God and no other. The Bible denies the validity of any religion or philosophy that does not acknowledge God, as described in its pages, as the sole object of worship. Any god whose description differs from that of the Bible is a fiction and, therefore, does not exist.

Second, as the sole Creator of the universe, He has both the authority and the ability to rule over all of creation, including people. His sovereignty is absolute. And, because He is morally perfect, He is the sole judge of what is right and what is wrong. Consequently, He alone has the qualification and the right to sit in judgment over each person.

Third, God’s love for people is infinite. It is without boundaries. His love cannot be measured, because it has no end. He knows all about us, but He loves us still. Nothing He knows about us could

make Him love us less, and no matter how great our devotion may grow, He cannot love us more. His love is not only infinite, it is also absolute.

Fourth, God's guidance is unpredictable from a human perspective. He often leads His people into places and circumstances that are surprising because He does not color within the lines drawn by humans. While His character remains consistent, His methods cannot be calculated as if He were a programmed machine.

Fifth, God's blessings upon us are astonishing. While He is just, He frequently offers mercy. He gives us more good things than we merit, and He shields us from many sorrows we deserve. The best word to describe His character, His values, and His methods is *grace*. Furthermore, His grace is unstoppable, even by our rebellious rejection of Him.

With these essential facts in mind, let's begin our examination of Abraham's life in detail. As we follow the patriarch's journey from pagan ignorance to biblical enlightenment, let me challenge you to put yourself in the sandals of this noteworthy nomad. By the time you read the final words of the last chapter, I hope you will have accepted at least three important truths.

First, truly enlightened thinking builds upon the truth that God, as described in the Bible, not only exists but also actively governs His creation (see Psalm 111:10 and Proverbs 1:7). When life is viewed through this lens, scientific discoveries become clearer, and the world—with all its chaos and danger—becomes a less frightening place.

Second, the God of the Bible loves you and has been actively involved in your life from the day you were born—and even before. This is true whether or not you recognize His activity or choose to acknowledge Him.

Third, God has a plan for you, and this plan includes blessings greater than your ability to imagine. Many centuries ago, He established a plan to redeem the world from evil, and He has made a place

CHARLES R. SWINDOLL

for you in His grand design. This redemptive plan began with His choice of one man, Abraham. Because his story is the archetype for my story, and your story, let's walk in his sandals as we learn about this God who loves us so much.

Chuck Swindoll

JANUARY 2014

CHAPTER 1

GOING . . . NOT KNOWING



IN THE BEGINNING, God created everything—the universe, our sun, this planet—and He populated the earth with plants, fish, birds, animals, and finally humans. And it was good . . . in fact, very good. Everything in creation existed in symbiotic collaboration with everything else. That is, until Adam and his wife, Eve, the first humans, violated their Creator’s one and only rule: of all the millions of fruit trees on the earth, do not eat the fruit of one specific tree (see Genesis 2:15-17). When they chose to eat of that tree anyway, despite the Creator’s grave warning, everything changed. *Everything.*

Their choice to disobey God was an act of rebellion. They chose to follow their own desires instead of trusting in God’s leadership. And their act of rebellion changed how the world operates. Before the Fall, everything had worked according to God’s grace, but after that moment, the world quickly became a place characterized by suffering, disease, pain, selfishness, violence, and death. People were born with Adam’s rebellious nature, and within just a few generations, the entire human race became so incorrigibly corrupt that

God wiped out all but a handful of lives—Noah and his family (see Genesis 6–9).

Several generations after this new beginning, the human population rebounded, but its moral condition was hardly any better. In fact, by the time of Abraham, humanity was well on its way to becoming incorrigible again. People lived according to their own rules, which according to archaeological data included all kinds of vice and perversion. Instead of seeking to know God, their Creator, they exchanged truth for superstition. They entertained themselves with campfire stories of mythical spirit beings whose activities affected the physical world, they carved idols to represent these imaginary gods, and they then did appalling things to appease them.

God could have turned His back on creation. He could have abandoned humanity to its own self-destructive ignorance. He was not morally compelled to rescue humanity from the evil it created and perpetuated. Even so, God established a plan to redeem the world, beginning with one man. He would make this man a model recipient of saving grace and establish him as the founding father of a new and unique nation. In time, as the plan unfolded, this nation would become the means by which all the world might hear of the one true Creator God and return to Him.

God’s redemptive plan began with His choice of a man named Abram.

God’s Chosen Man

We know this man by the name Abraham, but he was born Abram. God changed his name at a critical point in the narrative, but for the first 99 of his 175 years, he answered to Abram.

He lived around the end of the Early Bronze Age (circa 2000 BC) in a thriving, bustling, cultured city known as “Ur of the Chaldeans” (Genesis 11:28). The land of the Chaldeans—also known as Mesopotamia—was located in present-day Iraq, which archaeologists and historians call the cradle of civilization because this is where

ancient people first gathered into cities and established societies. “Few periods from ancient history are as well documented by artifacts and inscriptions as is the time of Abraham.”¹ Consequently, we know a lot about this man’s culture, religion, beliefs, and everyday life.

Abram was an ordinary member of his society, no different from his neighbors. Upon his birth, he received a name that means “the father is exalted”—most likely a reference to the deity worshiped by his family. People in ancient Mesopotamia worshiped a pantheon of mythical gods, ruled by the moon god, Sin, whom they regarded as “the lord of heaven” and “the divine creator.”² Like his relatives and neighbors, Abram worshiped idols and accepted mythology as truth (see Joshua 24:2). Even so, God appeared specifically to Abram and gave him personalized instructions: “Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1).

It is important to note that God didn’t appear to a group of people and then offer a general invitation to follow. We should also observe that Abram didn’t seek out God for a relationship; God approached him. It’s doubtful Abram had even heard of the one true Creator God before that point. By an act of pure grace, God dipped His hand into that idolatrous hole to select Abram out of all people.

Why this particular man? Did Abram turn from the idols of his ancestors and seek God? Did he make himself worthy of divine mercy? Far from it! The Lord chose Abram for reasons known only in heaven. We can say for certain that Abram did nothing to earn or deserve God’s favor. Nevertheless, the Lord appeared to this ignorant, sinful, superstitious idol worshiper and said, “Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those

The Lord chose Abram for reasons known only in heaven. Abram did nothing to earn or deserve God’s favor.

who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1-3).

God’s call of Abram began with an imperative—a clear command. God told him to leave his country for a land that He would show him . . . sometime later. To receive the promised blessings, Abram had to leave behind everything he relied on for safety and provision—homeland and relatives—and trust that God would honor His commitment. A New Testament writer reflected on his ancestor, stating, “It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8).

Stop and think about that for a moment. Put yourself in Abram’s place. You’re roughly seventy-five years old, with a wife in her mid-sixties. You’ve lived in one place your whole life. You have an established homestead in a familiar city with family and a community you’ve known since birth. Suddenly, the Lord appears to you in a physical manifestation—whether visual or auditory—you cannot deny as authentically supernatural, and He tells you to pack up and hit the road for an undisclosed destination. Can you imagine Abram’s conversations with friends and neighbors?

“Oh, I see you’re packing up, Abram.”

“Yeah.”

“Really? You’re leaving town?”

“Yes, we leave in a few days.”

“You know, you’re not getting any younger. Are you ready to start all over somewhere?”

“Yep, Sarai and I are moving.”

“Really? So, where are you going?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re packing up everything you have, leaving everything familiar, and you have no idea where you’re headed? Have you lost your mind?”

Everything within us recoils from making big changes without

thorough planning. Most of us need to see where we're jumping before committing to a leap. But God called Abram to obey this call without complete information. Abram didn't know where he was going, so he couldn't trust in a well-thought-out, long-range plan. Nevertheless, the Lord gave Abram *sufficient* information to make a reasonable decision.

When Abram encountered the Lord, he knew that God was real. The awesome splendor of God's presence left him no room for doubt. Moreover, the Lord gave him three specific promises that made obedience worth his trouble. While his neighbors thought he had lost his mind, Abram had good reason to trust in God, even without knowing every detail of the plan.

God's Unconditional Covenant

Different kinds of covenants appear throughout the Old Testament—some between individuals, others between nations. There are also several divine covenants, which are contracts or agreements between God and people. In the Garden of Eden, the Creator established a covenant with Adam and Eve: "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:16-17). Note the promise: "If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die" (verse 17).

A little further in the Scriptures we come to Noah's time, when God said, "I have decided to destroy all living creatures, for they have filled the earth with violence. Yes, I will wipe them all out along with the earth! Build a large boat" (Genesis 6:13-14). When the floodwaters receded, the Lord promised, "I am confirming my covenant with you. Never again will floodwaters kill all living creatures; never again will a flood destroy the earth. . . . I am giving you a sign of my covenant with you and with all living creatures, for all generations to come. I have placed my rainbow in the clouds. It is the sign of my covenant with you and with all the earth" (Genesis 9:11-13).

Some covenants are conditional, meaning that fulfillment by one party depends upon fulfillment by the other. These agreements usually include if/then statements: “If you do your part, then I will do my part.” When God settled the Israelites in the Promised Land, He established a conditional covenant with them: “If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully keep all his commands that I am giving you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the world. You will experience all these blessings if you obey the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 28:1-2). Conversely, He said, “But if you refuse to listen to the LORD your God and do not obey all the commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come and overwhelm you. . . . The LORD himself will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in everything you do, until at last you are completely destroyed for doing evil and abandoning me” (Deuteronomy 28:15, 20).

An unconditional covenant is a straightforward promise that contains no stipulations. In the Lord’s first encounter with Abram, He established an unconditional covenant. He did give the patriarch a command, and Abram had to obey to claim the Lord’s blessings. Still, the promises did not contain if/then statements. They were simple declarations:

- “*I will* make you into a great nation” (Genesis 12:2).
- “*I will* bless you and make you famous” (verse 2).
- “*I will* bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt” (verse 3).
- “All the families on earth *will be* blessed through you” (verse 3).

Note also that the covenant includes three major areas of blessing:

- a *national* blessing
- a *personal* blessing
- an *international* blessing

God promised a *national unconditional blessing*. Abram's descendants would be numerous enough to form a large nation. Let us not overlook the fact that God made this pledge to a man in his midseventies! Abram's wife, by then in her midsixties, had not given birth to any children. As a barren couple well past their prime, they had given up hope of having a single child, to say nothing of a whole nation of descendants. Yet the Lord promised, "I will make you into a great nation."

Today we know that God had in mind the nation of Israel, as history tells us that Abraham is the father of the Hebrew people. God made this promise to bless a nation without conditions; He guaranteed its fulfillment without fail. Of course, Abram and Sarai had to wait. They were not yet ready to receive this particular blessing. A twenty-five-year, faith-building journey lay before them. And when Abram's confidence wavered during those years between the promise and the fulfillment, the Lord reaffirmed His unconditional covenant at least two more times.

When Abram arrived in Canaan, the territory was overrun by the kind of evil that had precipitated the great Flood (see Genesis 6–9). To make matters worse, Abram relinquished part of his land claim to settle a family dispute (see Genesis 13:1-12). The Lord said to Abram, "Look as far as you can see in every direction—north and south, east and west. I am giving all this land, as far as you can see, to you and your descendants as a permanent possession. And I will give you so many descendants that, like the dust of the earth, they cannot be counted!" (verses 14-16).

Years later—still with no child of his own—Abram wondered if perhaps his chief servant, Eliezer, would become his official heir. The Lord soothed the patriarch's fear.

The LORD said to him, "No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own who will be your heir." Then the LORD took Abram outside and said to him,

“Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That’s how many descendants you will have!” . . .

So the LORD made a covenant with Abram that day and said, “I have given this land to your descendants, all the way from the border of Egypt to the great Euphrates River—the land now occupied by the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites.”

GENESIS 15:4-6; 18-21

We don't like waiting, but that's when God does some of His best work on our souls.

We don't like waiting, but that's when God does some of His best work on our souls. When I'm forced to wait on God's timing, I change. Sometimes I discover that my request was selfish—not part of God's agenda at all. Other times I find that my level of maturity could not yet bear the blessing God wanted me to enjoy; I had to grow up so I could handle it well. Very often, my circumstances needed to change, or the blessing would have become a burden.

As we see Abram's faith journey unfold, we'll see why he had to wait so long to receive God's promised blessings.

God promised a *personal unconditional blessing*. This included great wealth as well as personal protection. Later in the story, we're told that “Abram was very rich in livestock, silver, and gold” (Genesis 13:2). He was known for receiving many blessings from God, including “flocks of sheep and goats, herds of cattle, a fortune in silver and gold, and many male and female servants and camels and donkeys” (Genesis 24:35). The people of Canaan referred to him as “an honored prince among us” (Genesis 23:6).

This is a good place to pause and say God does not condemn the wealthy. God reserves the right to bless some with an abundance of money and material possessions, and not bless others in that way. That's His sovereign right. In our materialistic culture, we might

accuse God of cruelty for withholding material blessing from some, but God's economy doesn't trade in our currency. Some of His most honored servants haven't had two shekels to rub together, including His own Son. He does promise, however, that temporal poverty for His sake will be richly rewarded in eternity (see Matthew 6:33; Mark 10:29-31).

Abram never apologized for being rich. In fact, God used his riches in wonderful ways, as we will see later.

God promised an *international unconditional blessing*. On top of the national and the personal blessings, God heaped a blessing upon all of humanity: "All the families on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3). This refers to all races and nationalities—the whole world. God would bring a blessing to all people through the descendants of Abram, the Hebrew nation.

In His grand plan to redeem the world from sin and evil, God built a nation founded upon one man's faith. This nation would be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6, *esv*), responsible for leading the ignorant, superstitious, idol-worshipping nations into a relationship with the one true Creator God. The Lord established the Hebrew people as "a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind" (Isaiah 42:6-7, *esv*). He said, "I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). And to help them accomplish this great task, He situated Israel on a little land-bridge nestled between the expansive Arabian Desert and the vast Mediterranean Sea.

Anyone traveling between the great empires of the ancient world—Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon—had to pass through the land promised to Abram's descendants. If Israel remained faithful to their calling, merchants, armies, and vagabonds would see a blessed nation and ask, "Who is this incredible king who makes you so prosperous and secure?" And the Hebrew people could answer, "Our King is the God of Abram! Would you like to know Him?"

ABRAM'S HALFWAY OBEDIENCE	
Genesis 11:31–12:3	Acts 7:2-4
<p>One day Terah took his son Abram, his daughter-in-law Sarai (his son Abram's wife), and his grandson Lot (his son Haran's child) and moved away from Ur of the Chaldeans. He was headed for the land of Canaan, but they stopped at Haran and settled there. Terah lived for 205 years and died while still in Haran.</p> <p>The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you."</p>	<p>Our glorious God appeared to our ancestor Abraham in Mesopotamia before he settled in Haran. God told him, "Leave your native land and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you." So Abraham left the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran until his father died. Then God brought him here to the land where you now live.</p>

After spending much of his life—perhaps from birth—in Ur of the Chaldeans, Abram was instructed by God to “leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family” and go to a place to be disclosed later. Sadly, he didn’t respond with complete obedience; he obeyed only in part. When he left Ur, Abram brought along his father, Terah, and his nephew, Lot. And with them came their households and possessions.

Abram moved in the general direction of Canaan—the land God had promised him—but he traveled no farther than Haran. According to ancient inscriptions, the main trade routes from Damascus, Nineveh, and Carchemish converged in this city. Perhaps lured by material abundance and the opportunity to build wealth, Abram’s caravan got sidetracked. More likely, however, another obstacle stood between Abram and complete obedience. The moon god, Sin, whom Abram’s family worshiped, had two principle seats of worship: Ur of the Chaldeans and . . . (you guessed it) Haran.

It wouldn’t be hard to imagine that Abram’s father, a lifelong

devotee of the moon god, couldn't tear himself away from the deity's sanctuary in Haran, known to the locals as "house of rejoicing."³ This is why the Lord instructed Abram to leave his family behind; He knew they would become a perpetual distraction from his calling. When Abram's father decided to linger in Haran, Abram should have bade his father farewell and pressed on to Canaan.

Abram also allowed his nephew, Lot, to tag along, possibly because he felt sorry for the younger man. Lot's father had died some years earlier (see Genesis 11:27-28), and he undoubtedly latched on to Abram for fatherly guidance. Conversely, Abram may have viewed Lot as his potential heir, having no son of his own. As the story progresses, however, Lot proves to be an even greater distraction than Abram's father. Life threatening, in fact.

Your Developing Faith

Genesis 12:4 begins the story of Abram's seedling faith becoming a fully mature, fruit-bearing tree. I am comforted to see that God didn't void His covenant with Abram because he failed to obey fully. Fortunately for Abram—and for us—the Lord doesn't expect anyone to exercise perfect faith. Instead, He meets us where we are and then helps us cultivate increasingly more mature trust in Him. So I don't mind telling you that God isn't finished with me yet. He continues to stretch my faith muscle so that it will become ever stronger with use. And He's doing the same for you.

As you reflect on Abram's faltering start, let me encourage you to examine your own faith journey by asking yourself three penetrating questions.

1. Are you seeking God's will deliberately and passionately?

Of the seven deadly sins, sloth may be the most sinister of all. Deadly passivity can consume our lives, and before we know it, we have nothing to show for our years. But sloth isn't laziness. Sloth has little to do with inactivity. At its core, sloth is disconnecting from what

should keep us passionate. Sloth is failing to follow the course set before us by God, failing to fulfill our divine purpose.

I challenge you to pray, “Lord, guide me into Your will, regardless of what change is necessary, regardless of where I must go or what I must do. I want You to know, Lord, I’m available. And I don’t want to live outside Your will.” Then be prepared for some uncomfortable answers to your prayer. Faith rarely involves easy choices.

Early in my ministry, several years after I had graduated from seminary, I took a pastorate in a suburb of Boston. Within eighteen months, I realized I was not a good fit at that church. I had sincerely thought this would be my place of ministry for years to come. Furthermore, that little church had spent \$1,600 to move my family and me—a small fortune in the mid-1960s. I felt so embarrassed about the possibility of leaving only a couple of years after arriving. I kept saying, “Lord, I want to do Your will, but I don’t think this is where I’m supposed to be.”

Finally, I talked it over with Cynthia, and she agreed. But we were young and inexperienced; we didn’t know what to do. What does a pastor do when he realizes he’s not where the Lord wants him? There was nothing wrong with the church and they loved me, but I couldn’t shake a sense of restlessness that became increasingly more distracting and burdensome.

I’ll never forget visiting Tom, the chair of the elders. He ran a tuxedo shop, and I met him at his store. We walked behind the curtain and sat down in the back room. He said, “What’s goin’ on?”

Tears filled my eyes. I felt embarrassed and hated to break the news. “Tom, I’ve got to tell you, I don’t think I ought to be here.”

Naturally, he asked what anyone would ask. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Nothing’s wrong, and you don’t think you ought to be here?”

“Right.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know, Tom. I just know I can’t stay here.”

I’ll never forget his gracious response—some of the most wonderful words I’d ever heard. “Chuck, if the Lord doesn’t want you here, then we don’t either.”

He could have said, “Well, you know we spent a lot of money moving you here. We worked hard to set you up in a house. We even put up new wallpaper for you. We’ve gone to a lot of trouble, and this is how you thank us?” There was none of that shaming stuff. He joined me in submitting to God’s leading, even though it didn’t make a lot of sense.

That leads us to the second question.

2. If God were to have you leave your comfort zone to take on the challenges of the unfamiliar, how would you respond?

Trusting in God rarely involves easy choices. If every missionary looked for comfort or convenience or familiarity, missions would collapse overnight. Ministries would fold, and charities would close up shop. Every choice to follow God’s leading involves sacrifice—at least the sacrifice of our own desires. Do you trust the Lord’s character enough to obey Him without having all the details worked out? Are you willing to accept a short-term loss in order to receive divine blessings you cannot yet see?

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3. Are you making obedience too complicated?

If you’re discussing your decision with too many people or talking in endless circles, you’re making obedience complicated. You’re probably falling into one of the following traps:

- You’re hoping someone will give you a compelling reason to do something other than what you know in your heart to be God’s will.
- You’re hoping to find a way to obey without having to face hardship and sacrifice.

ABRAHAM

- You don't like risk, and you're hoping that God will change His mind if you delay making the decision long enough.
- You're hoping that by talking and waiting, you'll feel good about the decision before having to commit.
- You haven't yet accepted that there's no such thing as a decision without at least some negative consequences.

If you know what God wants you to do, obedience isn't complicated. It may be difficult, but it's not complicated. Stop hoping it will be easy, and give up the search for alternatives. Don't wait any longer for all the details to be worked out. The Lord has given you an opportunity to grow in faith. He wants you to trust in His faithful care and rest in His unfaltering power. The time to obey has come. Now . . .

Go!