

# Responding to God's Call—The Obedience of Faith

Genesis 12:1-9

Halifax: 1 March 2015

## Introduction:

Last week we looked at the call of Abram—

- but not so much at his response to the call.
- That was deliberate because this is such an important subject that I wanted to devote a whole sermon to his call and a separate sermon to his response.
  - Abraham is important because he is given to us in scripture as a pattern of what it is to be effectually called—to have true saving faith that reconciles us to God.
  - Jesus mentions him, the apostles preach of him in Acts, Paul mentions him as a pattern for us in Romans and Galatians, and James mentions him in his epistle.
    - So it is important for us in understanding what faith is to pay careful attention to Abram and his call.

Last week in looking at the call itself,

- I stressed that there was nothing extraordinary about Abram or his family that caused God to call him instead of others (as we can see in Gen 11:10-31)
  - his fathers had been at Babel...
  - they lived and had children and died like everyone else
  - his father Terah had been an idol worshipper at Ur—he even named his children after pagan gods...
  - and Abram himself was childless, having a barren wife who was already advanced in years.
- Yet, God called him—He called him freely, by free grace, not because of merit.
  - We saw in 12:1-3 that God promised excellent things for him by grace...
    - Much of what was sought by man at Babel by the flesh, God would provide by grace...
      - He would make Abram a great nation, He would bless him, He would make Abram's name great, He would make him secure, and He would make him a blessing to all the nations of the earth.
      - The LORD came to him with these wonderful promises out of the blue.
    - All this was given to Abram freely, not based on what he did—all he had to do was receive the promises.

But when God's call comes to His elect, there is a believing response.

- That is what we find with Abram in our text—the call comes and he responds with what is called the obedience of faith.
- It is this obedience—what is called *the obedience of faith*—that I want to look at today as we continue to study the example of Abram.

Our scripture reading will overlap with what we read last week.

- I will read Genesis 12:1-9.
- Please give me your careful attention because this is the word of God.

**Genesis 12:1-9:** Now the LORD had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” <sup>4</sup> So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram *was* seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. <sup>5</sup> Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they

departed to go to the land of Canaan. So they came to the land of Canaan. <sup>6</sup> Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem, as far as the terebinth tree of Moreh. And the Canaanites *were* then in the land. <sup>7</sup> Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” And there he built an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. <sup>8</sup> And he moved from there to the mountain east of Bethel, and he 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. <sup>9</sup> So Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south.

In this passage, you can see a sequence of Abram’s response to God’s call, which is a pattern of every believer’s response...

- First, there is the call which is heard and received...
- Second, there is the obedience to the call...
- Third, there is worship at the altar...

We may summarise this simply in this way:

- Faith hears, faith obeys, faith worships
- Let’s look at each of these.

## **I. Faith hears!**

A. It really hears! It hears the word of God as the word of God—as that which truly comes from God with all the authority and power that belong to Him.

1. Abram has a life changing encounter with God when he hears from God.
  - a. Before that, Abram had every reason to serve God with reverence and fear.
    - God was his creator—and that was evident not only from the creation itself, but also from the testimony of Shem and others who knew him.
    - He also knew about the flood—or certainly should have known about it as he also had access to this knowledge.
      - But like every other family, Abram’s family had drifted into idolatry.
      - They had changed the truth of God into a lie and worshipped and served demons—other gods—creatures—idols.
        - We are told that, as I showed you last week, by Joshua in Joshua 24:2.
  - So Abram should have served God, but he did not, until...
  - b. his life was transformed by God speaking to him.
    - The LORD Himself singled Abram out and came to him, and from that point on he was never the same.

2. Things are never the same after you hear God...
  - From then on, you know Him—you have heard His voice and you cannot escape it...you cannot *un-hear* Him.
    - You fear Him—you know that He has all authority in heaven and earth and that your eternal happiness is in His hands.
    - You see Him—you cannot deny Him—you cannot ignore Him even if you wanted to.
  - Jesus says that His true sheep hear His voice and come to Him...
    - He does not mean that they hear an audible voice, but He means that they hear His word with all the authority that belongs to it as coming from Him—from the living God—it has the impact that it ought to have.
  - When that happens to you, you know that it is true and it trumps everything else that would try to contradict it.
    - That is why we cannot receive into membership those who question the Word—they have only heard it superficially...
      - They have not heard from God in a life changing way—as Abram did.
      - They have not really encountered God Himself speaking to them by the power and authority that is His.

B. And when you hear God's word this way, you embrace His promises to you.

1. It is a marvellous thing that when God speaks to us, He speaks promises.
  - a. We have seen them here in Genesis 12:2-3...
    - We looked at them last week—the promise that God will do great things for us that we could not do for ourselves.
      - He will make us a great nation—bring us into Christ's kingdom...
      - He will bless us—make us truly happy...
      - He will make our name great—we become immortal in Christ who is raised from the dead and whose name and immortality is given to us.
      - He will make us a blessing—we will be enabled to serve others and be a real blessing to them.
      - He will bless those who bless us and curse those who curse us—all of Christ's enemies will be destroyed and all of His friends will be brought to glory—they are perfectly secure in God's plan...
      - and through us—in Christ in particular, all the families of the earth will be blessed—the gospel will reach each of the 70 nations that were divided at Babel—every tribe and tongue will believe.
  - b. When you hear these promises from God—as truly from Him...
    - You believe what He says!
    - You believe that God will be merciful to you!
    - Your life will never be the same again because of your faith.

2. From then on, nothing else matters to you.
  - You have heard from God! You now have hope in Him!
    - His reward is everything to you.
  - I don't mean that you won't waver—of course you will...
    - But nothing can take away His promises at last!
    - They always come back to you when you have lost sight of them.
      - You know that His promised purpose will be accomplished.
        - Hardships don't matter—you have God's promise!
        - Persecution and ridicule don't matter—you have God's sure word.
      - You know God and you have hope in God and nothing can destroy that—
        - when you have truly heard His voice!
  - Like Abram, you have a permanent anchor in God's word!

TRANS> But we see in Abram something else about hearing from God...

- When you hear from Him, you not only receive His promises, you also obey His commands!
- That is our second point...

## II. Faith obeys!

- It cannot do otherwise.

A. It leaves all to do what God says.

1. When you know that it is God who has spoken the commandment, it comes with all the authority that belongs to Him—
  - And just as we have already seen—you can't just ignore what God says when you know that God is the one who said it!
2. You can see this obedient response in Abram...
  - In verse 1, God told him to leave his family and his homeland...a hard thing to do...
    - **Gen 12:1: Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you."**
  - And in verse 4, it tells us that Abram did just that...
    - **Gen 12:4: So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him...**
      - The passage goes on to explain how Abram took everything he had with him—
        - his whole household including the servants he had acquired as well his nephew Lot and all his possessions...
      - But do you see those words in v. 4: *as the LORD had spoken to him?*
        - Those words tell you why he went...

- He did not go because he wanted to explore or because he was tired of where he was living or wanting to escape problems or look for greener pastures...
    - He went for one reason—because the LORD told him to go!
    - That is what faith does!
  - He had to leave the security of his familiar homeland...
    - And it is a very prosperous place he left too—he had some wealth and influence as is seen by the fact that he has servants.
    - He had relatives and relationships, but he leaves for one reason...
      - because God told him to leave.
3. That is how everyone responds at last when the word of God comes to them in a saving way.
- a. You leave everything to do the will of God...
    - You die to self because you have heard the voice of God.
      - You haven't really believed yet if you don't have this obedience.
      - Romans 6 says that you die with Christ when you believe.
    - Now what God says takes precedence over everything else...
      - Like Abram, you obey Him instead of living your own way.
        - You obey Him in whatever He tells *you* to do.
  - b. And what does He tell you to do?
    - Not to leave your homeland and wander around in Canaan—that was specific to Abram...
    - Now that Jesus has come, He tells you to believe on Him—to repent of your sins and to trust in Jesus for salvation—for the forgiveness of sins...
      - He tells you to deny yourself and to follow Him, and Jesus says that you are to keep His commandments...
        - You are to put away stealing and start working and giving...
        - You are to bless rather than to curse...
        - You are to love as Jesus loved...love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself...
        - You are to leave father and mother and wife and children to follow Him if they will not come with you.
        - You are to worship God in Spirit and truth.
        - You are to be baptised and you are to submit to the elders of the church that Christ has appointed.
  - c. You obey because you have heard the voice of God calling you...
    - When you hear God, you realise that your own way is foolish and worthless—it gets you nowhere!
      - Faith transforms you.

- As Luther says,
  - [Faith] makes people righteous and produces all virtues; it chastises, crucifies, and weakens the flesh, so that it should not have its own work or strength but that the work of God should be in it. And thus it saves and strengthens the spirit.
  - Do you see what Luther is saying?
    - When you hear God with true faith, it kills you—it crucifies you so that from then on you start living for God...
      - You die to self and live to God—because you believe and you see how worthless it is to follow the flesh and how good it is to live for God...
        - you live by every word that proceeds from His mouth instead of according to your own fleshly lusts and desires.

TRANS> So the obedience of faith dies to self and lives to God.

B. This obedience of faith is the opposite of the way we began to live at the fall.

1. At the fall, you died to God and started living to yourself.

- We have seen that—Satan said, “you will be as God.”
  - Instead of God’s voice being the voice that you followed, you started following your own voice—your own lusts and desires.
    - You thought that was the thing to do.
  - That is the way of this fallen world—
    - A man wants to have a woman, so he takes her without marriage...
    - A woman wants to have more clothes and more spending money so she withholds her tithe and does not help the needy...
    - A child wants to play when his mom told him to clean his room so he ignores her command and goes out to play.
  - You say, “I will do it my way. It will make me happy to do it my way.”
    - You think you are like God.
- But when you hear the voice of God with saving faith...
  - You realise that your way is worthless...
  - You must have God’s blessing!
  - You must go in God’s way...
    - And though your flesh is still strong and there are times when you don’t go His way, whenever that happens, you repent...
      - Your flesh is weakened and mortified...
      - You come to your senses because you have heard the voice of God and His voice has authority in your life.
      - You deny yourself and you follow Him and you repent whenever you go your own way.
        - Sin no longer has dominion over you as it did from the fall.

2. And this obedience of faith must not be confused with false religion.
  - There is a lot of false religion and it has the appearance of dying to self.
    - But it is really not death to self at all.
  - If false religion, you may have been greedy, and you decide that that is no good—so you decide to give everything away for God.
    - Or maybe you simply decide that God should be served so you find a church and you devote yourself to good deeds and religious observances.
    - You may even have great zeal...
      - You may go on pilgrimages, and make costly sacrifices, you may engage in fastings and prayer vigils...
  - So what is wrong with it?
    - The problem is that you have not died to self.
    - You are bringing your own works to God because you have not really heard the voice of God in a way that crushes you.
    - You think you have something to give Him that will make you right with Him, so you have not really encountered Him in a true way.
    - You are like the men at Babel who thought they could do something to get to God.
  - When truly hear His voice, you realise that you have nothing of your own to bring—your flesh is corrupt...
    - So instead of coming with your works, and presenting them to God and saying “look at what I brought to you God,”
      - you rest in God’s promise of mercy and grace.
    - You come not so much to give your life to Him as to receive life from Him.
      - You do good works—yes indeed—but you do not present them to God as some great righteousness...
      - You do them because you are following God and He calls you to do them and because you see that His voice has authority...
        - But your trust is in Jesus and what He has done, not in your works or in what you have done—
          - Your works are imperfect and you dare not rest in them.
        - You know that if you bring your own works to God, God will say, “What is that that you bring to me? I don’t want that! I want what is holy and pure.”
          - It is God’s free mercy in Christ that you rely on.
          - When you have that, then He accepts your works—not because they are perfect, but because they are wrought in faith.
          - They are done in Christ—all your reliance is on God’s mercy in Christ.
            - You come to God in His way, not your own way.

TRANS> And that brings us to our last point!

### III. Faith worships at God's altar!

A. You can see in our text that Abram does not worship at Canaanite altars!

1. When he arrives in Canaan, we are told how he built altars to worship the LORD.

a. In verse 6, we are told how he came upon a worship centre in Canaan...

- It says,
  - **Gen 12:6: Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem, as far as the terebinth tree of Moreh. And the Canaanites were then in the land.**
  - There is little doubt that “the terebinth tree of Moreh” was a place of Canaanite worship...
    - They set up their altars on high hills and under significant trees believing that the gods were present in these places...
    - And *Moreh* means *teaching*, so it is a tree of teaching—a tree where Canaanites received oracles from their gods.
  - The text states that the Canaanites were then in the land,
    - and we already know that they are under God's curse on account of their idolatry and their detestable practices.
    - So here was a great idolatrous worship centre in Canaan—and what does Abram do?
      - Does he join with them in their idolatrous worship?
      - Does he worship Jehovah on their altars?
      - No indeed!

b. Abram builds his own altar to God.

- God appears to him to encourage him that He is with him in this place...
  - Remember that at this time people tended to think of deities as localised, so this would have been a welcome assurance...
  - And the LORD promises that He will give this land that is now overrun with Canaanites to Abram's descendants,
    - and then Abram builds an altar to offer sacrifices to Him.
- You can see all of this in verse 7...
  - **Gen 12:7: Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” And there he built an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.**

c. Abram knew that he could not rightly approach the living God in the way the Canaanites approached their gods...

- He must come offering the sacrifices that God commanded and no other.
  - We have already seen with Noah that the LORD had given special revelation about this that we do not have recorded, for Noah already knew the distinction between clean and unclean animals.



- Abel as well had offered sacrifices that pleased God, and so he had to have had instructions about how to do it from God.
    - It is never right for us to bring our own worship to God—we have to bring what He tells us to bring.
  - The LORD is very particular about such things...
    - He has always wanted us to know that it is not our own works that He wants, but it is whatever He has appointed.
    - The sacrifice He appoints is Christ—and the sacrifices that He appointed before Christ came were designed to point to Him.
  - And so Abram found it necessary to construct an entirely separate altar so that he might worship God according to God’s command.
2. This is very significant.
- a. Abram worships not as idolaters who do their own thing in worship, but he worships the way people worship when they have heard the voice of God.
    - They come doing what God says to do—rather than their own thing.
  - b. Later on, when Israel goes to conquer Canaan because of the wickedness of the Canaanites, Israel will be instructed to tear down the Canaanite altars...
    - They will be strictly charged not to worship the LORD as the Canaanites worshipped their gods...
      - Not merely not to worship their gods,
        - but not to worship the LORD in the ways that the Canaanites worshipped their gods—which was detestable to God...
      - They are to worship, you see, as a people of faith—
        - as a people who have heard the voice of God—a people who do what God says instead of a people who approach God in their own way.
  - c. And this applies to worship under the New Covenant as well...
    - In Philippians, Paul contrasts the worship of the Jews who rejected Christ with that of those have heard the voice of the LORD in the gospel...
    - Because they had rejected Christ, their worship was their own—
      - it was not what God had appointed—
      - it was worship in the flesh—
      - it was worship by those who had not died to self.
    - So in Philippians 3:3, Paul says of believers,
      - **Php 3:3: For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.**
    - In other words, we do not trust in our own works—in what we are or what we do...
      - We come to God in the way He has appointed and provided—in the Spirit with faith that rejoices in Jesus Christ!

- B. So we are to build God's altars (so to speak)!
1. And just what is the altar or the sacrifice that God requires?
    - a. It is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.
      - God has told us that any worship that does not approach the name of Jesus who was crucified is unacceptable to Him.
      - Jesus is the only acceptable offering to take away our sins.
        - We cannot join in ecumenical services of worship with Muslims and Buddhists, and Hindus and New Agers, and Papists, and Modernists who reject the gospel...
        - We have to have our own worship services.
          - We cannot partake of their altars and the altars of Christ.
    - b. Now of course under the New Testament, we do not actually offer a sacrifice, but are instructed to approach in the name of Him who was sacrificed for us.
      - In the Old Covenant, they offered sacrifices that represented Him.
        - They were sacrifices that represented Jesus in two ways as a substitute for us...
          - First, as the One who was wholly dedicated to God because we are not...
          - And second, as the one who offered Himself on the cross to atone for our sins.
        - Before Christ came, the sacrifices of animals represented Christ in both of these ways,
          - but the worshippers were taught that these sacrifices were only symbolic—they needed a real substitute—they needed Jesus.
      - Now that Jesus has been offered,
        - God no longer wants the offering of animals.
        - He does not need to be represented at temples in an outward show now that He has come and made the real sacrifice that is required.
          - To do that would be to deny that Jesus has come and completed the work that God required for our acceptance.
          - We are to come in faith, rejoicing in what Christ has done for our acceptance with God.
      - So when we say that we must build altars to worship God now,
        - what we mean under the New Covenant is that we must establish churches where the gospel is faithfully preached...
        - Where God's mercy in Christ is proclaimed as the only acceptable way to come to God.
          - It is not about what we do—for that is not good—it is what He has done for us that counts.
    - c. We are absolutely forbidden to approach God in any other way!

- 1) Any other way is our own way.
    - If you have heard the voice of God, you know that your own way is not acceptable to the LORD...
    - His word humbles you and causes you to give up on your own way and to depend on what He has appointed and provided to save you instead of on anything that you do or come up with.
  - 2) You must never confuse your dying to self with the sacrifice of Christ.
    - Your dying to self is necessary for you to come to God—as we saw, when we hear the voice of God, we die to self and start obeying God...
      - But your former life is not the sacrifice.
        - You are not to take that old dead corpse—your old life—and offer that to God to make you acceptable to Him!
        - That old corpse will not atone for your sin—not at all...
          - Only the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ.
      - So yes, you have to die to self when you come to the LORD, you have to be crucified with Christ,
        - but it is not your crucifixion, but His that atones for sin!
          - You are simply leaving an old broken down life of corruption and relying on Jesus' perfect life of righteousness.
          - Your repentance does not save you and neither does your faith for that matter...
            - It is Christ you turn to and embrace who saves you.
  2. Everywhere we go as God's people, we must build these altars to God.
    - a. We build them so that we may worship God.
      - Internal worship is not enough—
        - God wants us to outwardly declare that we are trusting in Christ alone—and that is why we come together as a church to call on the name of the LORD.
        - That is what Abram did wherever he went in Canaan...
          - He built altars and worshipped God.
          - With all his servants, it was a church about the size of ours—maybe a little bigger.
    - b. We also build altars (establish faithful churches that preach the gospel) as a witness to the truth about God...
      - We testify to the Canaanites that God must be approached by the sacrifice God appointed—by Jesus and no other way.
        - And we testify to our posterity the very same truth.
- C. When you approach God in the way that He has appointed, you can draw near to God without any hesitation!

1. You can have confidence because it is not based on your goodness, but on the perfection of Jesus Christ!
  - God will never reject His Son if you come in His name!
  - God has spoken and He has declared that we are accepted in Him and that anyone who comes on this basis will not be rejected.
  
2. Let us pray that God will raise up faithful churches all over our city, our province, our nation—even across the whole world!
  - Faithful altars where God is worshipped in the strong name of Jesus Christ.
  - This is how the church corporately in Christ will become a blessing to all the nations of the earth!