

The Covenant with Abraham

Growing up in the military was a life of constant moves, across the US and overseas. I learned to adapt, experiencing different cultures and finding my way to God. Looking back I can identify people and experiences through which God drew me to salvation.



Michael K. Olmsted Early Christians were referred to as “people of the Way” (Acts 9:2). Writers often compare the Christian life to a journey or pilgrimage, so we join Abram’s story as he begins the journey of a lifetime when God invites the 75-year-old man from Ur of the Chaldeas to “Leave your land, your family, and your father’s household for the land that I will show you” (v. 1).

This is the first spoken communication between God and a human since God established his covenant with Noah (Gen. 9). This covenant is different from Noah’s in that it presents God’s ultimate goal for humankind, centers on the grace of God, and includes the whole world, not just one race or nation. God’s plan of redemption encompasses promise, privilege and responsibility. “I will make of you a great nation and bless you. I will make your name respected and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, those who curse you I will curse; all the families of the earth will be blessed because of you” (vv. 2-3).

While this may sound wonderful and easy, consider that God is not presenting a clear detailed agenda and Abram does not have a long history with God. Abram’s journey is just beginning and he will learn many lessons the hard way. The phenomenal journey of faith begins with a single command, GO (“leave your ...”), because with God and life the wonders and discoveries are not found in standing still or holding on to the familiar and comfortable. Abram’s choice will impact his wife, nephew and all those who work for him, plus the significant herds and flocks that constitute the family wealth.

Consider that this old man is about to risk everything for a future that

exceeds his own life expectation. But is that not true for all of us in this matter of faith? I look back to my ancestors and recognize that my heritage in their faith decisions, and I look at my grandchildren who continue in the promise of God’s love today. The covenants we study in these lessons help us focus on the importance of our decisions and faithfulness now and into the future. Along the journey of life, like Abram, we will succeed and fail, but God remains true to his promise through the ultimate gift of Christ.

There is one significant difference between us and Abram. In the covenant God promises Abram “I will make of you a great nation” and “I will bless you and make your name respected, and you will be a blessing” (v. 2). This unique distinction is further emphasized with “I will bless those who bless you, those who curse you I will curse” (v. 3). Just as Abram was not chosen because he was perfect, so he was chosen to learn and grow in faith.

From the beginning in Eden, God is focused on establishing a relationship with us. Noah was a reaffirmation of that desire by God and Abram is the next person God chooses to help humankind find the way to God. The Old Testament narratives reveal how difficult humanity can be when God reaches out to us and offers a new kind of life.

The book of Hebrews points out that Abraham (Abram) is our great example of faith, not because of his doctrinal understanding, but because he tried to live out God’s promises. “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going. By faith he lived in the land he had been promised as a stranger. He lived in tents along with Isaac and Jacob, who were coheirs of the same promise. He was looking forward to a city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:8-10). Lest we miss the point, Hebrews 11:6 reminds us “It is impossible to please God without faith.” God told Abram to “leave your land” and Abram did that for the rest of his complicated life, discovering more about God all along the way.

Formations

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Scripture: Genesis 12:1-9

Every step Abram took out of Haran drew him deeper into God’s love and closer to God’s promises. Did he make mistakes? Yes! Did he make bad choices? Yes! Abram’s call is unique, but so is your call. We all confront barriers, take wrong turns, experience defeat and joy. This is life. If we are not on the move we are not growing in faith. God’s grace can overcome our failures and help us grow stronger.

You have one advantage over Abram. You have the unfolding story of God’s loving purpose from creation to Christ’s second coming as recorded in the Bible. Again and again you can read about the foolishness and failures of God’s people compared to the faithfulness of our loving Father. The journey of life is not easy, the obstacles often seem insurmountable, but the promises of God are constant. To live is to risk. Consider the risk God has taken for us. God uses fallible people to respond to and receive his grace, discover his faithfulness, and help others find the way. Think of what Abram would have missed had he not believed God. Jesus became one with us, subjecting himself to every human limitation, so that this world can see the heart of God. We have an advantage on our journey of life, the example of people like Abram, as we face danger and distractions.

Looking back I can recall times of grief, disappointment, uncertainty, and even despair. But every circumstance was followed by change and hope. God is faithful and has blessed me beyond my imagination. I have done some foolish things, missed some important opportunities to make a difference and stood still when I should have moved forward. God has always been there when I faced the truth. His grace is miraculous. His love is powerful. His way is the path to hope and wholeness. Thank God for preserving Abraham’s story to encourage us on the way.

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.