

GENESIS 12:1-9  
WHERE DOES FAITH START?

Let's play a word association game. You know the kind of thing: I give you a word and you tell me the first thing that comes into your head! The word I'm going to give you is... "Church"! What is the first word you think of when you hear the word "church"? You can tell me at the end of the service. I was part of a conversation a few years ago: as a group of church leaders we were sitting in circle (it is called a Samoan Circle if you've heard of it) and we were talking about the Church, and especially the future of the church. The idea was that if you wanted to speak, there were four chairs in the centre of the circle and you went to sit in one of these chairs and joined in a conversation with other people. I vowed that I wouldn't speak, but... My comment was to the effect that in some of the recent big debates in the church I felt that people were always telling me what to do, that I should think this way and believe something other than I have always believed! The person sitting in one of the other chairs started to respond and his first words were "You must..." The poor man; he got to say no more, because I simply pointed out that he was doing it to me again!! "You must..."

"You must" are words that start off many people's idea of Church. Church is the place where someone will tell you what you must do and that you must live your life in this way, not that way. "You must" is followed by a list of chores or duties that are to be completed before we have any hope of pleasing God and fulfilling our dream of heaven. The problem with "you must" - well, there are lots of problems, really, and we'll come to the biggest of them all in a second, but for now - is that Church, and the Christian life, becomes a duty: we come to church on a Sunday because it is something we *must* do out of a sense of duty; we do our religion because we must, out of a sense of duty! When people fail in their duty, we make them feel really guilty about their failure and try to motivate them all over again by that sense of guilt. It's miserable! We have duty on one shoulder, guilt on the other; no wonder we walk around looking as if we have a ton weight on our shoulders; we have!

The biggest problem with "you must" as way of starting off our ideas about Church is that it is not the Bible's starting place. There are "you must"s in the Bible, but they come later. The Bible's starting place is quite different: "I will". God makes promises. That's the Bible's starting place when it speaks about church, about the people of God, about faith, about the Christian life. I hope you see that it is quite a different starting place: "I will" is all about God's promise to bless the world, promises full of grace and love, promises to make life full and complete. These promises draw a reaction from us as we discover them and the reaction that the promises draw is a reaction full of faith, joy, hope, and worship, as we see what God is like and what God has done and respond to God from the bottom of our hearts.

Genesis 12 is the beginning of the story of Abram in the Bible, Abram who would go on to become the father-figure for three of the world's great religions. Just before this, Abram has started out on a God-inspired journey from the place he called home to a new home. But you get the feeling that Abram is not a natural traveller, that he'd prefer to stick. He got so far and God speaks to him again. Genesis 12 is the beginning of the story of one man's faith and through him the faith of a people, through him that faith that found its fulfilment in Jesus, the faith of which we are heirs. We can trace our faith-history all the way back to this conversation between God and Abram. This is something of a new beginning for the world: Abram and Sara are the beginning of God's plan to bless the world, the "launch-pad of His whole mission of cosmic redemption." (Chris Wright) So there is nothing small here; this is a big story in Bible terms, a story that opens up God's blessing for the world. One couple, one

people, one nation, but the whole world is to benefit from the blessing of God promised to Abram.

Seven times in Genesis 12, God says "I will". *"I will..." (Genesis 12:2f,7)* It all starts with these promises made by God. God makes these promises and the whole idea is that these promises will inspire a response from the one to whom the promise is made. There are different promises, God promising different things to Abram, but all of them are about life and making life complete, fulfilled in some way or another. God makes the promise that Abram will have a family and that one day his family will be a great nation; there is a promise that his name and reputation will be great, that generations later people will still remember him and hold him in high regard; there is a promise that God's attitude to the nations will often be shaped by the way in which they treat Abram's family; there is a promise that the blessing of God to Abram will be a blessing for the nations through Abram; there is a promise that God will give Abram the land, perhaps the most concrete of these promises, and this promise is being fought over still. Family, reputation, prosperity - these are God's promises to Abram; this where the story starts, with God saying to Abram "I will".

Abram responds to these promises. God says to Abram: *"I will... Abram left..." (Genesis 12:4)* Not a natural travelling man, but he left his home and travelled and God went with him and blessed him; Abram obeyed. God says: *"I will..."* and the thing about promises is that you either believe them or you don't; *"by faith, Abraham made..." (Hebrews 11:9)* He trusted God to keep the promises that He had made and as we've seen, God did not disappoint Abram. God says: *"I will..."* and Abram worships God, he praises Him for His promises and His love. *"He built..." (Genesis 12:7,9)* These were the only marks that Abram left behind on the landscape when he moved on, the piles of stones that marked the places where he worshipped God. His obedience to God, his faith, his worship - these were all drawn out of him by the promises; obedience, faith, and worship are not duties for Abram in Genesis 12, but it was a joy to him to do these, inspired to obey, to trust, to worship by the goodness of God, by His love, by the promises He had made.

Last of all, he is challenged to *"be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2)* The promises of God are for sharing. The saddest thing about the Old Testament is how the people of God forgot this sharing, neglected this sharing, so that by the time Jesus comes the blessing of God is firmly fixed in the people of Israel, and is for no-one else. God's plan is that He will bless Abram with all these good things and Abram will live a life of faith and share these blessings with others. Abram not perfect and makes lots of mistakes, but we see the footprints of God's blessing beginning to be seen across the face of the world and people's lives are changed by that blessing. We hear the promises of God, we believe, obey, and worship. Then "mission is something God does!" (Wright) Mission is something God does because loves the world. He makes these promises to Abram because loves Abram; Abram has done nothing to deserve these promises, but God has given them to him because of His great love; these promises will come true, and these promises will shape one man's life, the life of his people, and the life of the world.

We need to add another chapter to the story, and the best example of that is Ephesians chapter 2. Paul knows about these promises God has made, but he also knows what we're like as people. He reminds the Ephesian Christians that human nature has a dark side, sin, and that we are all touched by that dark side; it lives in every human heart. The remedy? The solution? "You must"? No! The remedy: *"But God..." (Ephesians 2:4)* These are the first words in the Christian faith: *"But God..."* This is where the whole Christian faith begins, not with us but with God and with the great things that God has done for us. Sure, there are obligations, but they come

later. It all starts with the grace and love of God for the world, grace and love that are demonstrated in the gift of Jesus and in His life, death and resurrection. God has done great things for us. With these great things that God has done there is a new set of promises that God has made to us: He has promised to be with us always and everywhere by His Spirit; He has promised to forgive our sins because Jesus has died; He has promised to be the help and strength of our lives and to listen to our prayers. These are the promises of God for us.

We have faith because we are inspired to trust the promises God has made. We have faith because we respond to what God has done for us in Jesus. We worship God because we are inspired to praise Him for all that He has done for us. Our responses, obligations if you like, are all responses to God's grace. This is quite a different way to think. Faith is a response to promises; we trust God. Don't have faith because someone tells you to have faith; believe the One who has loved you and given His life for you and for your blessing. How many people have grown up being forced to go to church and at the first available opportunity have thrown off that duty and obligation, yet it is the deepest privilege we will ever have to worship God, to enjoy God, to be thrilled by His grace and love. We serve and love Jesus and serve and love other people because Jesus has served and loved us; because we are loved, we love; because we are blessed, we serve. It is a completely different way to think; it all begins with 2 words: *"I will..."*

This blessing is for sharing. The promises that God makes to us are all about the quality of our life; the promise of forgiveness heals all kinds of faults and failings in our past; the promise to be help and strength enables us to deal with the hard things of life; the promise that He listens to prayers deepens our faith and our relationship with God; the promise to be with us gives us a sense of God through all of life. These blessings are for us, but are not to be kept to ourselves, they are for sharing. Don't tell your friend "you must have faith"; tell them the stories of Jesus that will inspire them to believe. Don't tell your friend "you must come to church" as if it were a duty and obligation; tell them that we have a God who inspires us to worship simply by His love and His grace. These blessings are for sharing, and they begin with 2 words: "God has..."; others will love and trust Lord best when inspired by grace and love.

Duty, obligation, guilt - not the best motivators! Yet, "if you don't, then..." - how often are these words heard in Church? It simply reinforces the idea that to be a Christian you have to live with sense of duty on the one shoulder and guilt on the other. It breaks my heart! Because there is a much better way, the Bible's way, the gospel's way. *"I will..."* says God in His great promises and we are inspired; God is full of grace and love and we are inspired; God has done great things for us and we are inspired. We are inspired to believe and trust the One who has made these promises; we are inspired to love and serve the One who has loved us; we are inspired to worship the One who has done great things for us to save us. You say "Preacher, I'm too old to be inspired; I'm tired, I've lived all my life with this sense of duty and I can't change now!" Abram was 75 in Genesis 12, when God promised, and when Abram was inspired to faith, obedience and worship. *"I will..."* says the promise-making God and life will be graced, blessed. What's not to like? Is it not inspiring? Abram loved, trusted, obeyed, and worshipped this promise-making God!