THE CORNERSTONE OF OUR FAITH

Jesus Christ
The Chief Cornerstone
Ephesians 2:20

Faith Lessons from the Life of Abraham
Terence Highsmith

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**Terence Highsmith** currently serves the Westview church of Christ in Huntsville, Alabama, and is currently working on a M.Div degree at Harding School of Theology. He has studied at Heritage University (formerly International Bible College), University of Phoenix, and East Carolina University.

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how to use this study

Each lesson in this *The Cornerstone of Our Faith* study has four major parts.

Every lesson begins with an introductory section called *The Foundation*. In this section, the author will give background material to help prepare your mind and heart for God’s Word.

The second part of each lesson is called *The Cornerstone*. This section is always the heart of every lesson. The Bible is explored in detail to help us understand the text. Those who are accustomed to hearing African-American preaching can hear this section “preach.” God’s Word is powerfully presented so that all can understand.

The next section of each study is critical for the Word to fulfill its intended purpose. It is called *The Inscription*. Just as people take note of inscriptions on cornerstones or monuments, each lesson is written so as to drive home a point worth remembering and a principle worth following. It offers the encouragement to change attitudes or behaviors to align better with God’s Word. To *know* the Bible is one thing; to *do* it is another.

Every lesson ends with a series of thought-provoking *Discussion Questions* that help you explore God’s Word on a personal and a congregational level. These questions provide opportunities for group discussion and participation. Teachers can tell by the responses whether their students have really come to grips with the lesson.
The goal of this lesson series is to examine the life of Abraham in order to better learn what it means to live by faith. The 13 lessons in this book were previously taught at the Westview church of Christ in Huntsville, Alabama, in 2017 as part of a year-long journey through the Book of Genesis. Personally, I experienced a deeper awareness of the power and majesty of our Sovereign God. Despite humanity’s rebellion, He has mercifully chosen to extend His love to us so that we might have life with Him. I have been deeply humbled by the fact that He has chosen to love and use flawed men and women throughout history to accomplish His grand purpose of salvation.

In the command to put on the armor of God, the Apostle Paul wrote, “In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one” (Ephesians 6:16 ESV). Paul envisioned the Christian life as a battle against an adversary who would launch flaming darts of unbelief, selfishness, fear, conflict, and disappointment against the believer. The only way the Christian can survive such an onslaught is through the power and protection of God. Trust in and reliance upon God is an absolute necessity for surviving the spiritual battle we’re in. Prayerfully the lessons in this book will encourage you to take up your shield daily.
Lesson 1

Leave Your People

In fewer than 10 generations after God commanded Noah and his sons to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 9:3), mankind had rebelled against God’s mandate and decided to build a world order apart from God’s guidance. It was this type of self-determination which led the first family (Adam and Eve) to sin against God and which plunged humanity into a cesspool of violence and immorality (Genesis 6:1-6). In an act of judgment and mercy, God sent the Great Flood to destroy mankind, but He spared Noah and his family. God’s reaction to mankind’s rebellion displayed at the Tower of Babel consisted of His dividing the world into nations. Through the lineage of Shem, God initiated the next phase in His plan to crush the head of the serpent by choosing one man to be his instrument to bless the world—Abraham.

In Genesis 11:27-32, we learn that Abraham’s family originated in Ur of the Chaldeans. Scholars debate the precise identification of Ur, but most accept modern Tell el-Muqayyur in southern Iraq as the location. Led by his father Terah, Abraham migrated with his family from Ur to Haran after the death of his brother, Haran. Both Ur and Haran were ancient centers for the worship of the moon god, Sin. We learn from Joshua 24:2 that Abraham’s family worshiped pagan deities. While living in Haran, Terah died and Abraham (then known as Abram) assumed leadership of the clan, which included his barren wife, Sarai, and his nephew, Lot.
The account of God’s interactions with Abram begins with a call for Abram to leave his ancestral people and homeland: “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). Leaving the comfort of home, family, and familiar surroundings can be quite a challenge because such a transition can remove one from the love, care, acceptance, and security of a strong support system—especially in ancient nomadic cultures.

However, this is exactly what God demanded of Abram. The word, go is *lek-leka* in Hebrew, which expresses that Abram is to “determinately dissociate himself” from his current environment. Hebrews 11:8 makes it clear that Abram forsook his home in obedience to God’s call. He obeyed not even knowing where he was going! He exchanged the known for the unknown, the familiar for the unfamiliar. God called Abram to a new life, but he had to leave his old life behind. In like manner, Christians have been called to a new life of discipleship, which involves separation from the past life of sin, separation from the world, and possibly separation from family and friends.

**Separation from the Past**

It’s most likely, that prior to God’s calling him, Abram was an idolater, given what we read in Joshua 24:2—“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abram and of Nahor; and they served other gods.’” God’s call to Abram necessitated that he disavow any allegiance to the gods of his fathers. The call demanded that he separate himself from idolatry.

Separation from one’s sinful life is generally known as *repentance*. One key Hebrew word (šûb—“turn”) expresses repentance as turning away from the wrong path, i.e., sinful behavior, and turning back toward God. The same idea is
found in the New Testament with the Greek word *metanoe* which means “to change one’s mind,” resulting in a re-orientation of one’s life (Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 640). Paul’s recognition of the Thessalonians conversion in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 highlights the nature of true repentance—“For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” Just as God commanded Abram to leave his past behind and center his life on God’s promise, Jesus commands His followers to leave behind their past way of living to serve Him (Mark 1:15; Luke 13:3).

As we will learn from the life of Abram, repentance is not just a one-time event in the life of the Christian. Though known as the father of the faithful, Abram suffered many faith failures. Each one proved to be a learning experience, and over the course of his life, Abram’s trust in God grew. As we come to awareness of the sins and vices that hinder and keep us from experiencing the joy of the Christian life, at the same time we realize that much room exists for spiritual growth in our lives. We must resolve, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to eliminate sinful habits and attitudes that prevent us from fully pursuing the life God intends for us to live. On the other hand, we must learn to develop and pursue a lifestyle that will bring honor to God. Just as He did with Abram, God will provide us the grace to grow in our faith!

**Separation from the World**

*Worldliness* can be defined as a love for and a willingness to conform to the sinful values and practices of society. In addition, it can include a die-hard attachment to the things (good or bad) of this life. Detaching ourselves from the world involves aiming to love God above all else, seeking
to conform one’s life to His ways, and living by faith in His promises. In leaving his homeland, Abram demonstrated separation (or detachment) from the world. The writer of Hebrews argues that Abram was looking for a homeland, but that it was a “better one, a heavenly homeland” (Hebrews 11:13-16). Abram valued the promises of God over the things he possessed in Mesopotamia or would acquire in his travels.

Like Abram, we are called to value the things of God above the temporal things of this life. We are often consumed with physical necessities, but the life of faith demands that we “…seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” We often seek to make as much money as we can, but the life of faith demands that we lay up treasures in heaven. Jesus’ interaction with a certain rich man and the subsequent response of His disciples is instructive. This rich man diligently sought after Jesus to find out what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. His religious zeal was undeniable, for from childhood he had dedicated his life to observing the Ten Commandments. However, one thing stood in the way of his obtaining eternal life—attachment to his great possessions. Because he valued material wealth over following Jesus, it was impossible for him to enter the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the 12 apostles (with the exception of Judas Iscariot) left everything to follow Jesus. In Mark 1:16-20 we read that Peter, Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee (James and John) left their occupations and family business to follow Jesus. In return, the Lord promised that they would receive 100 times (along with persecutions) what they sacrificed in this life and in the “age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:30). Like Abram, the apostles demonstrated willingness to give up everything in order to live a life of faith under the Lord’s direction. What about us? Are we willing to trust God enough to detach from those things that bring status, influence, privilege, and comfort? Are we willing to embark on the journey of faith and give up the quest to create our own security in this life?
God’s call to Abram demanded that he leave his family, but we know from Genesis 12:4-5 that a sizeable caravan, which included his wife, Sarai, and his nephew, Lot, accompanied him. What did Sarai think about the whole matter? Did she question whether Abram truly heard from God? Did his relatives and friends try to persuade him to remain in Haran? Did they question Abram’s mental stability in following a “God” who was foreign to his people? How easy was it for Abram to leave his extended family and homeland? We don’t know the answers to these questions, but we do know that Abram responded with obedience. Later on in the narrative, we will discover that Abram remained faithful through the challenges of family strife and doubt. In addition, he passed the test of supreme loyalty by being willing to sacrifice his promised son, Isaac, to God.

The walk of faith demands supreme love for Jesus who said, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37). Our Lord knows that for some, allegiance to Himself will lead to family conflict. In such cases, we must not value our attachment to family so highly that we cave under the pressure of persecution. And like Abram, we must not cherish our families so highly that it prevents us from fulfilling God’s call on our lives.

Abram looms over biblical history as the father of the faithful. His journey began at age 75 when God called him to leave his people and homeland. Abram willingly left Haran with his wife, Sarai; his nephew, Lot; along with their belongings and people they acquired. In doing so, Abram demonstrated a high level of commitment to God and His promises. He demonstrated the willingness to listen to God and the faith to accept that God would work out the details of His plan.
Questions

1. In what ways does the Tower of Babel incident show that humanity at-large had once again rebelled against God’s purposes?

2. What do we learn about Abram’s family in 11:27-32?

3. How would you define worldliness?

4. Jesus interactions with a rich young man showed the man valued riches above God. What temporal things compete for your ultimate allegiance?

5. Have you experienced family conflict because of your allegiance to Jesus? How did you deal with it, and what was the outcome?

6. What comfort zones might be preventing you from stepping out on faith to do what God has called you to do?

Endnotes

1 All Scripture quotations are from the The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (2016). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society
