

## The Call of Faith

*By Faith: Pt.6*

The *Austin Statesman* had an article on Tuesday – kind of an update on our heatwave. In the month of July, we had 29 days of triple-digit temperatures. It was the most 100-degree days in a single month since Austin began keeping records in the 1890's. So far in 2022 we've recorded the hottest ever Austin May, hottest ever June, hottest ever July...and now it's August.

I think summer in Texas is a good time to talk about suffering and troubles...it's an illustrated sermon about hell! And much like with our mixer question today, everyone is talking about the same thing; How do you cope? Of course that's not *just* a question for a broiling Texas summer. There's many a self-help book and TV talk show asking the question. It's the subject of many conversations around the office break room. Have we determined a work-from-home equivalent of the office water cooler yet? I need to know that for future sermon illustrations.

But how do you cope with challenging seasons in life? How do you keep your equilibrium, how do you keep you stay standing when life is really coming at you with all sorts of curve balls? And not just survive, but actually thrive – the flourishing life – because none of

us just want to “make it”. How can you live a life of stability and equilibrium and courage and poise and *power* no matter what comes at you?

Now in terms of religion, that's the same thing as asking the question, “How do you live a life of *faith*?” And there's one guy in the history of the world who is preeminently an example of a life of faith. In fact, he's so unique that there are three religions - I don't think there is anybody else about whom this can be said - that all look to him as the paragon of faith, the father of the faith, the perfect example of what it means to really live a life of faith.

And that man's name is Abraham. When I was a wee lad in Sunday School we had a song about “Father Abraham” – I will *not* subject you to that this morning, but it's a good source of cardio. But Judaism, and Christianity, and Islam – three major religions - all look to Abraham as the father of faith. That's pretty unique, especially when you consider Christianity and Islam are the number one and number two religions in terms of number of adherents in the world. And so what I'd like to do is just read you three verses out of his life. And I'd like to draw out some of the principles we learn from Father Abraham's story.

Because the things life sent him and the way he was able to meet them and master them are examples for us. His whole life is described in the book of Genesis. It starts from about chapter 12 and goes all the way to chapter 25 – so he gets a lot of ink. But there’s a little summary of Abraham’s life in the New Testament, and I’m going to read you three verses from **Hebrews 11:8-10**. That’s where it says:

*8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*

Let me give you a little bit of background on Abraham. How many of you wish God would show up and very clearly communicate with you? Yeah, be careful what you wish for. Because for Abraham, every time God showed up and spoke to him, he had a crisis. The first time God comes to him and says, “I’m going to ask you to leave your land where you live now.” He lived in Ur of the Chaldees, which is on the eastern end of the Fertile Crescent – roughly where Kuwait is today. And he was very happy there.

His family had been there for years. He was part of a prominent family. He was in a comfortable situation. He was in a familiar culture. And God called him to leave all that and travel to another land and He didn’t even tell him where the land was at first, so it was just, “Leave. Go.” In the King James Version of the Bible it says God appeared to Abraham and said, “Get thee out of thy country.” That’s what God said. It’s a great introduction. “Hi. I’m the Lord God. Get out.”

The second great crisis happens in Genesis 15 when God appears again to Abraham and says, “I’m going to give you this land I’ve called you to. I’m going to give it to you.” Yet throughout Abraham’s entire life there was a never a time when he ever had an opportunity to settle down. There was never an opportunity in his whole life to even own a *foot* of land. He was continually living in tents on other people’s land even though God had said, “I’m going to give you a place to settle down. I’m going to give you a land.”

The third big crisis came when God appeared to him and said, “I’m going to give you a son out of your own loins and out of your wife’s body.” But at the time, Abraham and his wife Sarah were in their nineties. And God says, “I’m going to do it. Just wait.” It went years and years before it happened. And finally, when they did have a son, God shows up one day - this is in Genesis 22 - and says, “Now I would like you to *kill* your son.” That’s a difficult story I have dealt with in much detail in other places.

But in other words, here's the story of Abraham's life: God said, "Get out!" Abraham said, "Where?" And God said, "I'll tell you later. Just go." The Lord said, "I will give you this land." Abraham said, "When?" And God said, "I'll tell you later. Just wander around in tents." The Lord said, "I will give you a son." Abraham said, "How?" And God said, "I'll tell you later. Just wait around." The Lord said, "Slay your son." Abraham said, "Why?" And God said, "I'll tell you later. Just walk up the hill with him. Take the knife. I'll tell you in time."

And *every time* Abraham goes out and masters the situation. Now if you read the whole narrative, you'll find out that he fell down a number of times. He was far from perfect. Ironically, you could never call him "Honest Abe". But the point was, *you* might say, "God doesn't appear to me like that," but look at a person's life. Again and again, inexplicable calls, difficult circumstances, unbelievably confusing, incomprehensible tragedies, one after another. If you haven't had them yet, you haven't lived very long. That's all.

Abraham, however, lived a big life. Because in the face of it, he mastered these circumstances. The circumstances didn't master him. He governed life. Life didn't govern him. Now how? Three principles. He *heard* the call of God. He *obeyed* the call of God. And he *looked ahead* to the city with foundations. Let me just briefly explain what those three things are. That's what we get out of the Bible text.

**First of all, Abraham heard the call.** God comes to him and says, "Get out." Let me suggest to you for a moment that you will never lead this big, masterful life unless you hear the call. In fact, I'll go a little further. Those of you who say, "I've been raised in the church and I must be a Christian." Well here's a way for you to tell. Have you heard the call? You're not a mature Christian unless you hear this call. What is the the call? The call of God is something that comes in and disturbs you and makes you think about your whole life.

Let me tell you something about human nature. If you ever had to take a course on child development in college, you learned that human beings are all natural imitators. We're tribal animals and we learn social cues from the group around us growing up. That's how we learn. We imitate what we see around ourselves. We pick our own models and we do it from the very earliest stages of development.

And so it's just natural that when you come up in life, you do what everybody says are the things people like you do. It depends on what your crowd is. I notice the street kids make fun of the kids who get good grades and the kids who get good grades make fun of the street kids. The seed beds of racism and discrimination of all sorts are not in the genes, they are in the examples.

Your parents said, “This is the way people *like us* do things.” And you tend to come up and you just get into the flow. But the call of God comes. And it can come in a thousand ways. It can come through an illness or a tragedy. It can come through an impactful book or teacher. It can come through a friend. But the call of God always comes and makes you ask, “Why am I doing what I’m doing? What does it all *mean*? I don’t want to just do things to do things. What is it *for*?” Here’s Abraham, living a comfortable life. The call of God takes him to a whole new culture. Here’s Moses – we’ll get to him soon - living the life of a nobleman in the center of power. When the call comes he identifies with the slaves and the poor and goes out.

What happened? They were just going with the flow, but they heard the call of God and they *thought* about what it all means. I often quote a man widely considered to be one of the great preachers of the twentieth century. When we were in London, the first thing we did after stepping off the plane – jet-lagged and all - was attend a Sunday morning service at the historical Westminster Chapel where he pastored for decades. Aren’t you glad you’re not a preachers kid?

But his name was Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Now, My parents have two children and they are both doctors – Dr. Anthony Scoma and Dr. Charlece Hughes. But my sister is a “real” doctor. Trust me, if the pilot ever comes over the speaker and asks, “Is there a doctor on the plane?” You want the girl who studied neurology at medical school, not the guy who studied historical theology at seminary! But Lloyd-Jones – even though he was a pastor and preacher – was a *real* doctor.

Before he felt the call to preach, he was a rising, young medical doctor. A real star. He was on a track to really be one of the leading physicians in England. In the 1920s, he was a protégé of one of the head doctors at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in London, which was the foremost teaching hospital in the world at that time.

And something came and disturbed him and made him decide to leave medicine and go into the ministry. This is what happened. He knew a man in St. Bartholomew’s Hospital who was one of the chiefs of medicine. If you were a chief of medicine at St. Bartholomew’s, the world was your oyster. Society opened right up for you. Everything was great for you. And this chief doctor had been dating a woman, who unexpectedly took ill and died very suddenly.

Shortly afterwards, Lloyd-Jones was in his chambers or his quarters there at the hospital and this man unexpectedly showed up at his door. And he said, “Can I come in and just sit by your fire?” because this is London and I think every room is required to have a fireplace...and tea kettle, I believe. But clearly this doctor was just wanting a place to get away from anybody else.

And Lloyd-Jones said this great man sat there at the hearth and he stared into that fire, and he never said a word or took his eyes off the fire for two hours. Two hours! Lloyd-Jones said as he watched that, it made a real impact on him. In his own words, “That event had a profound effect on me. I saw the vanity of all human greatness. Here was a tragedy, a man without any hope at all.” And shortly after that Lloyd-Jones left the medical profession to pastor a small church in Wales.

Now what is the call? What does the call mean? Abraham looked to the city “with foundations”, which means the call of God is something that comes in and shows you that nothing in *this world has* foundations. What gives you the ability to be courageous, what gives you the ability to *risk*, what gives you the ability to be *free* in this life is to first of all come to the radical and profound understanding that *nothing* in this world has any foundations. Nothing here is secure. Nothing lasts.

Let me give you some examples. Let me start at the bottom. This world has no **physical** foundations. A hundred years ago after the Western intelligentsia got rid of the idea of God and decided, as a result, that matter must have been eternally here...So they believed matter was solid. Now we know *nothing* is solid. The world doesn't have physical foundations. Quantum physics shows us that everything is energy in motion.

What is an atom? It's not solid. It's energy in motion. The Big Bang Theory, which is the reigning theory of how the world started, is that there was an explosion. And the reason we got matter is because the universe was expanding. And as it cooled, we got matter, but the universe is unraveling. It's winding down. Eventually it will completely come apart.

When Peter said in **2 Peter 3:10**, “*...the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.*”, he was just anticipating 21<sup>st</sup> century physics 2,000 years early. How can you be sure of anything if the *very* universe is unraveling, so eventually everything is coming apart? What's the famous poem? “Some say the world will end in fire, others say in ice...” Well either way, anything you do or accomplish will be completely forgotten, because there won't even be anybody around to remember.

But let's go a little further. The world has no intellectual foundations. Here's what I mean by that; no intellectual foundations. Look at the ways in which Christianity, for example, has been attacked. A hundred years ago, it was attacked viciously on the basis of a philosophy that we can call *modernism* - the Philosophy of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment believed human nature was basically good, that reason and science, empirical investigation, would solve all our problems. And inevitably, human beings and civilization would progress to higher and higher realms.

That was the Enlightenment. See? Trust in the infallibility of reason and science and in the inevitability of human progress. And on the basis of that philosophy, Christianity was attacked as utterly pessimistic and primitive and anti-humanist and so forth. Today Christianity is *every bit* as attacked as it was 100 years ago, but the same people who attack it now utterly repudiate and ridicule the Enlightenment. This is what *post-modernism* is. Everyone in the intelligentsia is talking about the failure of the Enlightenment experiment.

In other words, the critics of Christianity today utterly ridicule the critics of Christianity of 100 years ago. Why? See, the critics of 100 years ago ridiculed the critics of 100 years before that.

If you're hostile to Christianity today, if today you have a lot of doubts about the whole idea that there could be a God, or the Bible could be true, or Jesus could be the Son of God, you have to keep in mind that people are going to laugh at you.

In other words, the next generation of critics is going to ridicule anything *you* have written today. Fifty years from now, you're going to be a laughingstock. A hundred years from now, you're going to be a laughingstock. Why? Everything is crumbling. Now you know, I can read Luther from 500 years ago...I can read Augustine's *City of God* from 1,500 years ago...many - not all of course - but the greats of the Christian faith still ring-true centuries later.

You see, Christianity - the real stuff, not the fads - gospel-centered Christianity doesn't crumble because it's not from this world. It's not changing. But the intellectual foundations of the world are constantly crumbling, constantly changing, because they don't work. Well, let me go a little further. Instead of thinking academically, look at the things *you* thought were cool and smart 10 years ago. And now you look back and you say, "Boy, I really made some stupid mistakes." Why?

Your perceptions are in flux. Your wisdom is in flux. The intellectual structures of the world are in flux. This world has no foundations. You *can't* say, "Now that I'm 45, I *know* what's true. Now I know." When you're 55, you'll think when you were 45 you were just really, in many ways, very immature, very naïve. In 2022, you can't say, "Now we know why Christianity isn't true." That's what they said in 1922. And now we're *laughing* at the things people said in 1922.

This world has no foundations. There are no physical foundations. There are no intellectual foundations. You *can't* settle down and say, "This is my security. I will never be moved!" It's going, it's unraveling, it's crumbling, no matter what it is. The style of your *jeans* is a metaphor for life – bell bottoms, skinny jeans, low-rise, high-wasted mom jeans – forget the sermon, just take a stroll through Goodwill! No foundations.

The world doesn't have any **psychological foundations**. What does it mean when they say "you can't go home again"? Think of the people you were close with in High School or college - I mean *really* close. When's the last time you've seen them? You know, just when you get a good group of people, they're gone. You can't keep your family together, even if you *have* a good family, even if you *don't* get

a divorce, even if your kids sort of turn out all right. They still leave. They're gone. You can't keep anything together that is a psychological foundation for you.

There's a whole group of white Americans who are terrified that they are being "replaced" by other ethnic groups. And there are whole media outlets dedicated to stoking those fears. The truth is, we're living in an age of globalization in which the world is getting smaller. And as a result, of course there's more diversity. But that's just the way history has always worked – ask Sitting Bull what America looked like in 1850. Times of rapid change always result in nationalism and racism and violence. Why are they so angry? Why are they so fragile? They built their identity on their whiteness and now that currency is losing some of its value. But *of course* it is, it never had any true foundation to begin with.

They haven't come to see that *everything* - culture, money, relationships, status, looks, dress-size, jobs, achievement - have *no* foundations. They are unraveling. They are not secure. They are a fantasy. They are *no* foundation. They are no security! And that's the reason why somebody like Lloyd-Jones suddenly...He was on the inside track. He was climbing the ladder. And he suddenly paused and said, "Wait a minute."

What was that? What so shook him? It was the *call of God*. And I'm not talking about the call of God to the ministry. I'm not talking about the call of Abraham into another culture, which is sort of like mission work. I'm not saying that. I'm saying the call comes to everybody if you listen. And the call of God is...if there is a God, He is the **only important thing**.

See, if there *is no* God, nothing has foundations. But if there *is* a God, then my relationship to Him is *ultimate* and is the *only* important thing. See, it's a *complete* switch of priorities. Have you heard that call? See, until you have that call...you're anchorless, adrift. Then here's the second point. The first point is you have to hear the call of God; that is to see there are no foundations here. **The second point was, he didn't just hear the call; Abraham obeyed the call.**

Now what does it mean to obey the call? It means you start to *act* as if...See, it's one thing to *see* the world has no foundations. It's another thing to *act* as if it has no foundations. Now how does that work? It's pretty simple. This is why you master life if you understand it. Back in the 80's, there was a Christian man who was CEO of a Fortune 500 company.

And that major company was about to be bought out, so he and most of the members of the board and the executive officers stood to make a tremendous amount of money. The board came to him and insisted that he essentially cook the books so they would all make two or three times more money than they would have otherwise if he had presented things with more integrity. He refused. They fired him.

Now you know, at his age, he knew when he did this - and he knew he was going to be fired - he'd never make seven figures again. He was not going to get a CEO job somewhere else, especially not after what happened. But on top of that, he realized he would miss out on the golden parachute. He would miss out on all the stuff that would have come to him. Do you know what he said in the aftermath? He said, "I never felt so free in my life."

Do you know why? If you think to be a person of principle, if you think to be a Christian, is too costly...If you say, "Man, if I tell the truth, if I'm absolutely faithful, if I do all the things the Bible says like, for example, give away my money in significant amounts, or turn the other cheek to an enemy, or stand up and identify myself with God and so on, people will laugh at me. Or I'll lose a lot of money. Or I will lose a lot of status." The only reason you feel that way is you haven't heard the call. You think your *money* is secure. You think your *life* is secure. You think your *reputation* is secure. It's *not*!



These things have no foundation. And the reason Abraham, the reason this CEO, the reason these people are able to stand up no matter what and just live their life and stick with their principles and do what they ought to do is because they've heard the call, and they've also obeyed the call. They start to *live* as if those things are secondary. And so there's where the greatness comes from. Do you see it?

I must tell you, though, to be honest before we get to the last... We're on the transition to the final principle here. Abraham heard the call, and he obeyed the call. *But* let's admit that this development into the great heart that Abraham was to become, was a *process*. Because if you actually go back - and I hope some of you will - go back to Genesis 12, and read all the way through to the end of his life, which is in Genesis 25 when he dies.

You will see Abraham definitely stumbled in a number of places. He often got the call, and he also often was shown that this world has no foundations. And he was called by God to live as if God alone was his security and that nothing else was. But there were some times in which he fell down. And the reason for that is our hearts cling to these old false securities. And so God has to bring us through a process. Those four calls to Abraham got *progressively* harder, didn't they?

God called him to see that his *culture* wasn't really the most important thing. It wasn't a foundation. Don't cling to your culture. He called him out of his culture. He called him out of his *family*. He called him out of economic *security*. Finally he even called him out of his most precious possession: his *son*. In every case, he was told, "Get out of it. Get out! Be willing to see this is not your foundation. Don't be controlled by these things anymore. You must control *them*, and the only way to see that is to know that I am your only security."

So God continually allows crises to enter into Abraham's life. And God progressively weaned him away from this world so he eventually became a great heart. Now was that cruel of God? Is it cruel of God to allow those things? Is it possible that's what's going on in *your* life right now, any of you? You know, *you* see it as just being kind of a cruelty. "Why is God letting this happen to me right now?" instead of seeing it as a call to get out, as a call by God to say, "Why don't you see the reason you're so devastated is you have put all the eggs of your heart in this basket? And every basket here on earth has no foundations."

You know, imagine there's a compassionate lumberjack. The lumberjack comes into a forest area. He knows that over the next several weeks, he is going to cut down every single tree in this particular area. And one day he sees a mother bird up in a tall tree starting to make her nest. So what does he do? Remember, he's a *compassionate* lumberjack. He goes over and, with the flat of his ax, starts to hit that tree and hit that tree. Of course it rattles the poor mother bird around, gives her a concussion.

She looks down. "Why is this jerk doing this terrible thing to me?" Finally she flies off and goes to another tree. Well what does the compassionate lumberjack do? He goes to the next tree, and he starts hitting that tree. Whack! Whack! She starts to have another concussion. She looks down. "Son of a...Who does this guy think he is?" So she goes from tree to tree. And he follows her.

He won't let up until finally he sees her fly away from the trees and start to build her nest in the rock, build her nest on the side of the mountain. *Then* he leaves her alone. Why? Every tree is coming down. It's not merciful to let people build their nests in trees. And that's exactly how God is. Was it merciful? Is it cruel of God, for example, to continually go to Abraham and keep rocking the tree he was in at the time?

Listen - we talked about the new NASA photos last week - all of us are sitting on this tiny rock called "earth", and we're rotating every moment at a rate of 1,037 mph. And since I turned 40 I can't handle the tea cups at Disney World anymore! And if you think *that's* something, because of our orbiting the sun, in addition to *spinning*, the planet is also rocketing through space at 1.3 *million* mph. If a big enough chunk of another space rock so much as *nicks* us, it's game over.

But no need to clutch at your seat, none of that actually matters. The odds of a significant asteroid or comet hitting earth is astronomical. But you know what's even money? Someday underneath every single one of us, a trap door will open, and we will fall off this mortal plain. And waiting below will be either the everlasting arms of God or millions of miles of nothing - which means, don't you see, that if God is your security, you are truly secure no matter what's going on in this world.

But if God is *not* your security, you *have no* security, no matter how good things seem to be going in this world. It's not cruel of God to show us that. And if He *does* show us that and you're willing to *hear* the call and *obey* the call instead of just getting bitter, you'll become a great heart like Abraham. Now lastly, I have to say one more thing, otherwise I will give you the impression that hearing and obeying the call of God is a matter of stoicism.

In other words, it would be very easy to say, “Okay, I can follow him. I *can* follow him. If I put all my heart into money or achievement or culture or even my children or my family, I realize nothing here has foundations. I realize I have to figure out what God wants me to do and follow my principles and make that the most important thing. I can *do* this.”

In other words, you can sort of reason it out rationally and then apply that good old American stick-with-it-ness. It won't be enough, my friends. It won't. It's just too cold. It's too calculating. It's pure ethics. There's no way it will really help you in the crucible. It will never help you in the furnace. But you see, what Abraham did was he didn't just look *at* life. Last point, **Abraham looked ahead.** What does it say? It says, (v.10) “*For he was **looking forward** to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*”

Now Abraham didn't know too much about what was up there ahead. He knew, he was told by God, that one of his descendants was going to come and was going to make the world a great place. So he knew about the Messiah in a very general way. Jesus Christ says in **John 8:56**, “*...Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day...*” So Abraham had a general knowledge, and he looked forward. He knew *something* was coming. He had hope on the basis of that.

But *we* know a lot more than Abraham. Here's why. When God calls you to get out, we also know of someone who “got out” in a much more profound way. The Bible tells us Jesus Christ...

He left his Father's throne above,  
So free, so infinite his grace;  
Emptied himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam's hopeless race:  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;  
For, O my God, it found out me.  
Amazing love! How can it be?  
That thou my God should die for me?

That's one of the hymns. You see, when we are called to get out - meaning if I tell the truth, if I am loving, if I obey God - I'm going to lose some security here. I'm going to lose some money here. I'm going to lose some friends here. It's *nothing* compared to how Jesus got out for you.

The Bible tells us Jesus got out. He *left* the safety of his Father's home. Eventually on the cross, he left his Father's heart. God turned away from him as part of the payment for our sins on the cross. He was absolutely stripped of *everything*, which means that a Christian has an advantage that even Abraham – the Father of Faith - didn't have. A Christian can think very concretely.

A Christian thinks like this: “If I am being called away from my home, if I am being called away from my money, and if I’m being called away from my family, it’s nothing - *nothing!* - like the homelessness or the pennilessness or the fatherlessness that Jesus Christ experienced for me. Who “emptied himself of all but love.” And he did it all for me so I could have a home and I could have true riches, and I could have a family that *has* foundations...whose builder and maker is God.”

In other words, a Christian is somebody who says, “Wait a minute. Since the *great* debt has been paid, all other debts are small things. Since the *great* disease has been healed, all other diseases are small things. Since the *great* romance has been commenced, frankly, all other romances are small things. Since the *great* home has been paid for that I’m going to, then all other homes are really less important things.”

And you become a person of unbelievable stability as you think of what Jesus went through. When you’re called to get out, if you’re called right now to do something that to do it right means it’s going to *cost* you and you’re hearing the call to get out, well, what do you do? You think about Jesus.

In the *Lord of the Rings* novels, the character of Frodo is a type of Christ figure. He carries a great burden into dangerous places and suffers immensely on behalf the rest of the world’s inhabitants. If he doesn’t complete the difficult task, there’s no hope for the rest of us. Whenever I read this, I hear Jesus speaking from the cross. In a moment of abject suffering Frodo says to his companion, Sam, “I can't recall the taste of food, nor the sound of water, nor the touch of grass. I'm naked in the dark. There's nothing - no veil between me and the wheel of fire.”

That’s how Jesus was on the cross. He left everything. He got out. Nothing *you* will ever be called to do will be to the same degree that *he* was called to do it. And he did it so when *you* go out...and make your sacrifices...you will know you have been given and guaranteed a home, a Father, a wealth *with foundations*. If you know that, you can face...a Texas August. You can face anything. Can you?

Let’s close in prayer...