

I. Introduction

A. I love just about everything about India – except the poverty. I love the people, the food, the colors and smells. I’m not crazy about the jet lag, but you survive that. What I do not like is the poverty. It can be overwhelming. Well, if you’re haunted by Indian poverty, you eventually end up reading about Mother Teresa – the small, Albanian nun who made it her life’s work to help the poor and dying in Calcutta.

B. One of the stories I read told of a man watching Mother Teresa caring for a dying man who was lying on the sidewalk. He was pretty filthy. The smell was horrible. His disease was gross and unsightly. But she had kneeled down to help. A man who was watching her, said to her, “I wouldn’t do that for a million dollars.” At which point Mother Teresa said, “Neither would I.”

C. I love the mission statement for the Sisters of Charity – the movement she founded. *Ministry done: with Jesus, for Jesus, to Jesus.* I suspect “with Jesus” and “for Jesus” makes sense. “To” may take a moment, but if you think about Matthew 25 you get it. There Jesus talks about caring for the poor and says, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it **to** me.” I want us to think about why we are doing what we are doing.

II. We’ve been rolling out the what. We have set out a plan to multiply the impact of the church, to multiplying churches – communities of grace, hope and love that are based on the life, work, teaching and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A. Locally we want to gear up for three more campuses here, we want to expand the work of the church among those who are under-resourced, primarily in North Chicago and we want to help other Gospel Churches in the area grow.

B. Globally we want to help our level one partners start churches that are committed to reaching people and renewing communities.

C. I’ve talked about why this is the strategy, noting that: we can’t do everything, and that we are focusing on the church because:

1. It’s God’s plan;
2. It’s been proven over the last 2,000 years;
3. The church is the place that marries Good News and Good Works;
4. The church mobilizes more people to serve than anything else;
5. When churches thrive, other institutions - like the family and the state - have a much better chance of being successful at what they do.

D. I’ve argued that there is nothing like the church. We need churches to thrive. We need new churches and campuses to start.

E. I’ve gone on to say: we are doing this because we are called to it; we are doing this because we can and should; we are doing this because it honors God and helps others; we are doing this because this is a plan that gets lots of people out of the pews and into the game, helping them grow in Christ-likeness; and it’s a great way to leverage the remarkable gifts and abilities at this church.

F. Over the last few weeks, I’ve been talking about what and why. But there is a why behind the why that needs a bit of attention. The question I want to focus on today is: what motivates Abraham? Why is he so committed? Why is he so trusting? Why is he so generous? Why is his heart soft to the things of God? I want my heart to be soft to the things of God. What can I learn from Abraham?

III. We are in Genesis 15. If you have a Bible, turn there. As you do, let me set the context.

- A. We first heard about Abraham in Genesis 11. He is the last halfway decent guy from the last half-way decent family. But things are coming to an end. The lights are going out.
- B. And then, in Genesis 12 – God intervenes. He calls Abraham and says: follow me and I will work through you to turn this all around.¹
- C. In Genesis 13 – last week - we get a case study pitting Abraham and Lot, where it becomes obvious, Abraham focuses on others and Lot focuses on himself. Abraham has an abundance mindset, and Lot has a scarcity mindset. Abraham embraces faith and lives in light of eternity. Lot is wrapped up in the moment.
- D. We are skipping Genesis 14. In that chapter Abraham gets into a fight with some foreign kings in order to rescue Lot. He takes some big risks to do so. And then he gives away all the plunder. In other words, in Genesis 14 we see more of what we saw in Genesis 13 – Lot making selfish and bad choices and Abraham caring for others.²
- E. We now turn to Genesis 15, where we pick up that Abraham is worried about a counter attack from the four kings he just defeated.

IV. V1: After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

- A. The phrase, “the word of the Lord,” will be used over and over with the prophets but only once in the first five books of the Bible. It suggests that Abraham has a powerful connection with God.³
- B. Learning to discern God’s voice is an important skill to nurture. It’s not always easy to tell. At this moment, Abraham has a hot line to God and he knows it.⁴

V. After this, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”

- A. Fear is a big topic in the Bible. In fact, the most common way Jesus greets his friends is by saying, “Fear not.” At the moment, Abraham is scared that the men he just defeated are going to launch a counter attack. This is probably not your fear. You are probably not losing sleep over a raid by tribal warlords. But some of you are living in fear. God wants to relieve you of that.
- B. There may be a lot to be gained by taking a hard look at your fears. Prayerfully unpacking them. They shape us, often not in good ways. Much of life is learning how to be shaped by faith in God and not our fears.
- C. In any event, God says to Abraham, “Don’t worry about it. I’ve got this. I will be your shield.⁵ I will fend off the bad-guys. And...

VI. “I will be your reward.”

- A. You may be familiar with the statement from Blaise Pascal, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” Abraham gets that hole filled. He wins God. That is better than winning the lottery.⁶ It’s better than getting stuff from God. Too many people want God for the things God can deliver. But the real prize is God himself.

VII. Sounds good, however Abraham does not appear that impressed, V2: But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

- A. “God, thanks for the reassurances and all. But your promises don’t mean that much to me, because you told me I’d have a son and I do not. My family line is coming to an end. I’m turning everything over to the hired staff.
- B. According to the Code of Hammurabi – the rule of law in that region at that time – if a man died without a natural heir, his possessions went to the chief servant of his house. For Abraham, this was Eliezer of Damascus.

VIII. **V4: Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.”** God loves adoption. It gets lots of positive press in the Bible. Indeed, it is a term used to describe how we enter into the family of God.⁸ But here he makes it clear to Abraham that His plan for Abraham and Sarah includes a biological son.

IX. **He (God) took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.**

A. This is a key verse. Some call it the key verse in the Old Testament. It’s one of the principal verses of the Reformation. Because it shows how we get right with God. Even in the Old Testament, we are reconciled to God by faith not works.

B. If all we had was Genesis, it would seem as though Abraham was saved back in Genesis 12. But Romans 4 and Galatians 3 make it clear that Abraham is saved here.⁹ We are saved by faith. This is the moment Abraham steps over the line.

C. Have you been reconciled to God? There was a great article in this week’s *Wall Street Journal*. It was written by George W Bush and it was titled, “How Billy Graham Changed My Life.” And in it, Bush notes that in 1985 he took a walk with Billy Graham and said that he was thinking about cleaning up his life, becoming a better person – in particular, he was going to stop drinking and start reading the Bible. He said that Graham affirmed he desire to be a better person. But then shared one of the Bible’s fundamental lessons: We should strive to be better, but we are all sinners who cannot earn God’s love by being good. We receive it through His grace. Bush says that grace is a profound concept, one he did not fully grasp that day. But a year later he did get it and made a decision to accept Christ by faith.

D. Have you made that decision? Have you asked Christ into your life? Do you understand that offer?

X. **V6: Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. He also said to him, “I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”** Things are good for a moment. Abraham has faith, for a moment. But – V8 – **But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?”**

A. Doubt is back. Certitude didn’t last long. In verse 6 Abraham is applauded for his faith; in verse 8, doubt is back. Let me say a few things about doubt, because I am sympathetic to those who struggle with doubt because faith did not come easy to me. It appears to be easy for some. It took me quite a while to decide that I was ready to believe – wanted to believe – but for a while after that, I didn’t believe. I couldn’t. And people would say, “believe, have faith” and I’d say, “but I don’t.” And then, after 18 months or so – of continuing to ask questions, seek, pray – I realized I did have faith. So I struggled with doubt on the front end, and still have doubts about some things many others seem quick to believe. My experience is that faith is like a roller coaster more than a elevator. It goes up and down not straight up.

B. There are a few bad ways to think about doubt, so let me say three points:

1. First: It appears to be nearly inevitable – more for some than for others, but it seems to affect most and never completely goes away. Case in point, Abraham. He’s a faithful guy. He’s left everything to follow God. He is a friend of God. Three faiths are based on his faith. But doubt gets him. It’s a pretty universal issue. It is not sin; it is not evil. It’s a common issue.

2. Second, there are different types and different degrees. I am thinking of a distinction between dishonest doubts – that are disdainful and a bit lazy, and honest doubts that are humble. The honest doubts do not start with the claim that truth depends upon my ability to understand it – and they often make us vulnerable in a good way.

3. Third, our doubts need to be managed. We do not need to fear them, but we shouldn't ignore them – we want to push on. Conservatives often think of doubt as bad – which leads to churches where you are not allowed to talk about doubt. Meanwhile, liberals often act as though doubt and skepticism are signs of sophistication and maturity. Which leads to nothing. Not to mention, this kind of doubt is not honest. If you doubt everything – then you would doubt your doubts. You would be skeptical of your skepticism. You'd be open to the idea that you are being gutless. That you just can't weight evidence and make a decision.

XI. So, Abraham expresses some doubt. What does God do? How does he respond? He is patient, and He gives Abraham more reason to believe. Let's keep reading.

V9: So the Lord said to him, “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.” These are the animals that will later be used in the sacrificial system set up under Moses. **Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half.**

A. Note: God doesn't tell Abraham what to do with the animals because Abraham knows what is going on. Abraham knows what is going on. God knows what is going on. We are the only ones who do not know what is going on.

B. So, what is going on? They are making a contract in an oral culture. Today we have attorneys, contracts are written, notary publics record them and papers are filed with the state. And if there is a dispute and you go to court, it all hinges on what the paper says. They will ask to see the contract. So, we can imagine that if God and Abraham were having this discussion today, instead of saying, **“Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon,”** he'd say, “Go get your attorney, draw up the contract and I'll sign it.” Abe lived in storytelling culture. They acted out their contracts.¹⁰

C. They cut animals in half – this is where the phrase “to cut a contract” comes from – and then they walked between the dead animals to act out the penalty of breaking the contract. The message was: “If I do not keep my end of the deal, may I be cut in two, spread apart and become food for the vultures like these animals.”

D. It worked back then. It might work today. If you show up at the door of your contractor's house, lay out five dead animals cut in half and walk between them and encourage him to do the same, suggesting that he (or she) will look like that if they miss the deadline, you might get better service. You might be arrested. But since they might think you were in the Mafia – this sounds like something right out of the Godfather – you might get better service.

XII. **V11: Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses,** I am told that it takes a while for vultures to show up,¹¹ so this suggests that Abraham had to wait a while.¹²

XIII. **Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.** The use of “dreadful” here means that when it was getting dark, a dread set over him. A horror, terror, a darkness in the darkness. This was not normal sleep.¹³ So, clearly, whatever God is going to do he was going to do alone.

XIV. V13: **Then the Lord said to him** – and here we get a seven-fold prophecy¹⁴ - **“Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.”** You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. **“In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”** Stay with me, it’s been a bit weird it is about to be amazing.

II. V17: **When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.**

A. A blazing fire pot is harder to translate than it is to imagine. What every commentator says is that the term used here is the same one that was used to describe what was happening: 1) at the top of Mt. Sinai when God came down on it; 2) with the pillar of God’s presence – His Shekinah glory - in the wilderness back in Exodus; 3) it ties in the burning bush and the fire that would occasionally fall from heaven.¹⁵ We have some sort of theophany here. Some sort of visible revelation of the divine. A piece of lightening appears and goes down the aisle. And as it does it says, “I will keep my promises to you.”

III. There are two amazing things to see here.

A. First, God walks the line. He moves down the bloody alley. He stakes his reputation and weight and honor – and in some sense He offers His life as collateral - guaranteeing that He will keep this commandment.

B. This is not something kings did except with other kings. They would require others to walk the line. But when entering a contract with some lesser entity, they did not. They wanted others to say, “if I fail I die.” But as king they were not going to say that. But here, God signs the contract. He doesn’t have to. But He promises: if I don’t bless you, may my immortality suffer mortality. May my immutability be mutable. May I die.

C. The second amazing thing is: He does it alone. It’s not just that He walks the line. He doesn’t make – he doesn’t even let - Abraham walk the line. God says: It’s all on me. Even if you don’t keep your end, I am vowing to keep my end. I will make sure this goes forward.

IV. This is hardly the only time we see God go first¹⁶ or put himself out for us.

A. During our study of the Minor Prophets we saw that God portrayed himself as husband who loves his unfaithful wife – and keeps loving and caring for her even while she is sleeping around.

B. In the Prodigal Son we have an image of a Father who humiliates himself by running to embrace the son who has shamed him.

C. Of course with Abraham we have Genesis 22

1. In most sermon series looking at Abraham, you give a lot of time to Genesis 22. I almost dedicated a whole sermon to that passage, but I’ve preached on it before and written about it and mentioned it so many times. So let me just remind you that that crazy, crazy passage in which God tells Abraham to take his son, his only son, Isaac, the son he loves and go to the mountain and tie him up and then offer him as a sacrifice.

2. That passage that is memorialized in lots of paintings and stories. It’s been told and retold, and it leads most sane people to say – too much. I couldn’t go there. Anything but that. Unfair. What kind of God would make that ask.

3. Let me remind you that:

4. Abraham was told to take Isaac and travel days away to a specific mountain to tie him up.

5. And that is because, hundreds of years later, this is where another son would be tied up on another altar and sacrificed. This is where Jesus would be nailed to a cross. Only this time no one yells stop. The Son dies.

6. God does that for us – for our redemption. God goes all in for us. He went first – and that was enough for Abraham to know that he could trust him.

7. And we not only have the advantage of seeing him go first – of seeing Genesis 15 – there are other images he gives us to model his love:

D. God understands the challenges we face. He gets doubt. And so, He says, “let me demonstrate my love for you, and he walks thru the bloody valley.”

E. Men and women, He is all in for you. He is not waiting for some future version of you that is nicer and holier. He goes first. We receive.

F. One of the challenges we face is that it’s hard to believe God loves us just by being told. We need to hear and think about what he did.

1. It’s hard to learn things by hearing them. .

V. There is one other thing to see here. The first is, we have to receive. The second is, we need to follow.

A. God does expect us to lean in. To place him first. If we are in we are expected to go all in. There are a lot of passages that say God is in for us – he walks the line. But there are also a lot of passages that say: He expects us to follow.

B. To make him first. To run after him. To not be lukewarm. God doesn’t do second.¹⁷

VI. In his book *Not a Fan*, Kyle Idleman argues that following Jesus is less of a decision than it is a commitment.

A. It’s not one time, it is ongoing. Jesus isn’t looking for the equivalent of the raging fan who goes to the Bears Game in January wearing body paint and little else, even though it’s 8 degrees outside. These people never actually play in the game.

B. He is not looking for the person who reads all the books and knows all the stats. He is looking for someone who is in the game. Working out, learning the plays, making blocks and tackles.

C. He is not looking for the person who will put a Jesus fish on their bumper sticker but is not really all in when it comes to the hard parts about loving your enemy, going to the end of the line, dying to self.

D. Men and women, if God isn’t first in our lives, then the rest of our life is out of order. As Augustine and other great thinkers make clear, we need to rightly order our loves.

XV. Is God first in your life? What would it look like for that to be true?

A. Do you need help sorting this stuff out? Let us pray for you, or sign up for a Spiritual Check-up. Come in and talk with someone.

XVI. Communion. There is at least one more worth noting from Genesis 15. God kept his word. He said he would walk the line and he did. But Abraham falls short – as do you and I – but Jesus walked the line for us.

A. In various ways, Abraham did fail to keep up his end. And so, God died.

¹ God makes three sweeping offers to Abraham: land (12:1); descendants, great nation (12:2); and through him he will bless all the nations of the earth (12:3).

² According to the Code of Hammurabi, Abraham could have kept the spoils they got from the kings they defeated. But he didn't.

³ In his treatment on this text (Fear Factor), Keith Krell notes: This phrase is repeated some 221 times in the OT. Constable writes, "The word of the LORD came' is a phrase typically introducing revelation to a prophet, e.g., 1 Sam 15:10; Hos 1:1; but in Genesis it is found only here and in v 4 of this chapter. Abraham is actually called a prophet in 20:7. It prepares the way for the prophecy of the Egyptian bondage in vv 13-16. Visions were one of the three primary methods of divine revelation in the Old Testament along with dreams and direct communications (cf. Num. 12:6-8). Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Genesis* www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdf, 2005), 134.

⁴ The opening paragraph of Genesis 15 illustrates what is commonly called in Bible study, the law of first occurrence. By this is meant that the first time a word or phrase is used in the Bible, it is used in such a way or in such a context as to highlight the basic meaning of it throughout the rest of Scripture. Four such phrases appear in this paragraph for the first time in the Bible: 1) "the word of the Lord came"; 2) "Fear not!"; 3) "I am your shield;" and 4) "And he believed the Lord; and it was reckoned to him for righteousness."

⁵ See also, Ps. 3:3

⁶ Satisfaction is only ever ultimately found in God. We may think that if I get: this job, this house, this spouse, this award, this whatever, we will be happy. No. Not for long. God is what we are after.

⁷ Before this, we have not been made privy to the thoughts of either Abraham or God on how this relationship is going. God had made grand promises, but we have not heard what Abraham thinks about the promises or the Promise-giver.

⁸ Ephesians 1:15

⁹ Romans 4:13,16; Gal. 3:6-9

¹⁰ See the same ceremony described in Jer. 34:18

¹¹ In his treatment of this text, Jeremy Myers writes: There are several things to recognize about this verse. First of all, Genesis 15:11 is telling us is that Abram had to wait a long time for God. Generally, it takes a vulture at least twenty-four hours to find a dead carcass because many of them rely on the smell of the gases that a decaying carcass produces. Most vultures, especially those of the Mid-East, will almost never eat a fresh carcass. Because their beaks are so soft, they must wait until the carcass begins to decompose. This probably wouldn't take too long under the scorching sun of the Middle East, but at least several hours. We know it was not more than a day because of what we read later.

¹² God is not slow, but we are often impatient.

¹³ The language used here is similar to Genesis 2:21, where God caused a deep sleep to come over Adam.

¹⁴ In 15:13-16, God makes a seven-fold prophecy concerning the nation of Israel: 1) You will be strangers in another country (Egypt). See Ps 105:11-15; 2) You will be slaves in Egypt; 3). You will be oppressed four hundred years. (The actual period of slavery was 430 years. In this passage it is rounded off to 400.) See Exod 12:40-42; 4) God will judge Egypt. See Acts 7:6-8; 5) Israel will come out with many possessions. See Exod 3:21-22 and 12:35-36; 6) Abram will not live through this period of slavery. See Gen 25:7-8; 7) In the fourth generation (400 years), Israel will return to the land. See Deut 9:4-6. Constable writes, "The Abrahamic Covenant is basic to the premillennial system of theology. This covenant has not yet been fulfilled as God promised it would be. Since God is faithful we believe He will fulfill these promises in the future. Consequently there must be a future for Israel as a nation (cf. Rom.

11). Amillennialists interpret this covenant in a less literal way. The crucial issue is interpretation. If God fulfilled the seed and blessings promises literally, should we not expect that He will also fulfill the land promises literally? The Palestinian, Davidic, and New Covenants are outgrowths of the Abrahamic Covenant. Each of these expands one major promise of the Abrahamic Covenant: the land, seed, and blessing promises respectively.” Constable, *Notes on Genesis*, 142.

¹⁵ Krell writes: The smoking firepot reminds us of the pillar of cloud representing the presence of God (Exod 13:21-22), the smoke on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:18), and the cloud of God’s Shekinah glory (1 Kgs 8:10-12). The blazing torch reminds us of the pillar of fire representing the presence of God (Exod 13:21-22), of the burning bush displaying the presence of God before Moses (Exod 3:4), and of the fire from heaven, which sometimes consumed sacrifices, God was well pleased with (1 Kgs 18:38, 1 Chron 21:26, 2 Chron 7:1).

¹⁶ Romans 5:8 is another place where we see that God goes first. It says that while we were sinners – while God could expect nothing from us by active rebellion and hatred – Christ died for us.

¹⁷ See Col. 1:15, Ex 20:2, Mt 6:33, etc.