

God Builds a Nation

Last week we began our series “The Story.” The first chapter of “The Story” covers the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Beginning with the Creation and Adam and Eve we learned that the God of the Bible is different than those of the nations surrounding Israel. Yahweh is not the sun or the moon or the stars, he is the creator of the sun and the moon and the stars. He’s not a distant deity unconcerned with humanity; or a dictatorial deity desiring to rule over us and compel us to be his servants. He is Yahweh, the God of Love who created us to be like him, to live in relationship with him, to walk and talk with him in a garden paradise which he created expressly for our delight.

We also learned that our ancient parents rejected Yahweh’s offer and chose to do their own will rather than the will of God. With that choice the story takes an ugly turn. Escorted out of paradise, man enters a world of pain, a world infected by sin that breaks out in jealousy, hatred and murder and the world produces a poisonous population, immoral and overwhelmingly wicked, so wicked that God decides to wipe it clean with a flood, preserving only righteous Noah and family.

But it didn’t take long after that first attempt to wash away the world’s sin before it is sadly evident that sin is a stubborn stain not easily removed. Before the gopher wood dries, the world’s second, first family is having domestic trouble. Noah becomes angry with son Ham, curses him and the nations to be born to him.

Again the people of the earth take a turn toward evil, obsessed with “making a name for themselves” and being a great nation. God steps in again, but this time, instead of wiping out these people that would make a name for themselves, he scatters them abroad and selects one man, Abram, telling him, *Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you, and I will make your name great.* And with those words God puts into motion his own plan to build a nation of people, a plan that requires of people not the fortitude to make themselves great but the faith to believe in a greatness that comes by trusting God, not flawlessly but faithfully. Abram becomes the father of the faithful and our great example of faith.

In the book of Hebrews faith is defined as *being sure of what we hope for, certain of what we don’t see* (11:1). This is a common idea in scripture. Paul teaches the Corinthians, *We walk by faith and not by sight* (2 Cor 5:7), *We fix our eyes not on what is seen but what is unseen* (2 Cor 4:18). To live by faith is to rely on a reality that transcends our senses, to believe that there are things we cannot see that are even more real, more important than what we can see. (*Wash your hands before you eat, remember germs. “Germs & Jesus” that’s all I ever hear and I’ve never seen either one.*)

To live by faith is the great alternative God offers us in his Word, to let the unseen rule the seen. So the writer of Hebrews tells the stories of people who lived like that, and no greater example was there than Abraham. Abraham’s story begins

with God's word to him. *Leave your country, your people and go to a land I will show you.* Amazingly Abraham does just that and demonstrates for us the first lesson of faith. *Faith is believing that what God promises he will give is worth leaving behind whatever we might have.*

Faith enables us to leave ***now*** things we have formerly trusted in to have ***later*** what God wants to give us. Notice, God doesn't show Abraham the end of the road of faith. Faith requires leaving your place before arriving at God's place. Abraham's place was "Ur"; but there are other places God often calls us to leave. A business man's place may be living for work. By faith God calls him to leave a life consumed with work in order to find a better place that God will show. Today many couples find themselves in a place of living together not married. By faith God calls you to leave a life that resists commitment and go to a better place God wants to show you. A married couple find themselves in a place where their commitment to each other has become difficult. By faith God calls you to honor your vows through hard times and find a better place God will show you. To a student who finds himself enjoying a place of popularity but has compromised his beliefs to get there. By faith God calls you to leave a demeaning popularity to find a better place God will show you. A church leader has become comfortable in a place of tradition, doing church a certain way. By faith God is calling you to focus less on church and more on Him and find that better place God wants to show you.

Here is a t-shirt for you. “What is your Ur.” Each of us today is being called by God to leave by faith some place we have come to rely on more than God in order to find the better place God wants to show us. Faith is knowing that whatever we are called to leave, in the end, is not truly reliable. Only one thing is truly reliable, God. Millard Fuller learned this lesson.

From humble beginnings in Alabama, Millard Fuller rose to become a young, self-made millionaire. A graduate of Auburn University and the University of Alabama Law School, he and a college friend began a marketing firm while still in school. Fuller's business expertise and entrepreneurial drive made him a millionaire at age 29. But as the business prospered, his health, integrity and marriage suffered. These crises prompted Fuller to re-evaluate his values and direction. His "soul-searching" led to reconciliation with his wife and to a renewal of his Christian commitment. The Fullers then took a drastic step: they decided to sell all of their possessions, give the money to the poor, and begin searching for a new focus for their lives. This search led them to Koinonia Farm, a Christian community located near Americus, Ga., where people were looking for practical ways to apply Christ's teachings. This is where the dream of Habitat for Humanity was born and flourished. The Fullers by faith left their riches to save their home and ended up building hundreds of thousands of homes for God.

By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country. Abraham saw promised land as his own. So a second principle of living by faith: *Faith waits on God even if it takes a lifetime.* Its tempting to turn away from living by faith if we don't see quick results. Many embrace a popular distortion of faith as a way to be successful in life. I call this "Popeye" Faith. You remember Popeye and his travails with his mortal enemy Brutus. When things got a little rough he only had to pull out his famous can of spinach and instantly the muscles bulged out all over his body and he had all the strength he needed.

That was one of the problems with the faith of the disciples. When they first began to follow Jesus it seems it was because they were impressed by what Jesus could do in an instant. Instantly he calmed a raging storm; instantly he fed the 5,000. Instantly he raised the dead. Later they would be more impressed by what it took Jesus a lifetime to accomplish. The most important things Jesus did could not be done instantly. *In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God for whom and through whom everything exists should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering* (Heb 2:10). Being "made perfect" took considerably longer than an instant. To "empty himself" Jesus would have to leave heaven, be born as a baby, grow up to become a man, suffer and die on a cross and then continually reign forever in heaven as our mediator and intercessor.

Living by faith is not instant gratification, its eternal transformation. The better place that God would lead Abraham to was not merely an earthly city to live in, but an eternal city to live for. It may be that some of our prayers here on earth may not be answered as quickly as we like, or at all. But the promise Abraham accepted by faith, was not diminished by a lifetime of waiting for it. Is there anything we are waiting a lifetime to receive, spending a lifetime looking for? It had better be something we can spend an eternity enjoying. As our Lord taught us. *What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world, yet lose his own soul?*

Hebrews tells us something else about Abraham's faith and Sarah's too. *By faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.* It was impossible for Abraham and Sarah to have children. It was laughable. They were in their nineties for heaven's sake! Sarah was barren. But *Faith believe the impossible is possible.* So, at some point Abraham and Sarah quit laughing, and how should I say it, they "exercised their faith" and what do you know. A baby came. They laughed again, out of joy. Faith changes our laughter from "Are you kidding, we can't do that!?" to "Well what do you know, we did it!" What kind of laughter has your faith given you? Over the years we've learned to laugh here at Quaker as God has surprised us over and over with what he can do. Years ago Shawn came to us with an idea. Some property was available near the church in Mbale that he

thought it would be a good idea to purchase. We had to pay up front \$3,000 to have the chance to buy it for \$60,000 later. We weren't sure what might be done with the property or of putting \$3,000 down just to hold on to a chance to spend much more later to buy it. To make a long story short, that initial \$3,000 investment has turned into Messiah Theological Institute, student dormitories, a beautiful conference center, a significant library and soon to come a world class campus for Livingstone International University. We were tempted at first to laugh at the idea. "Are you kidding? We could lose \$3,000." But soon our cautious chuckle changed into a faithful howl. "Well, what do you know. Look what God can do."

Money is easy for God. What he really wants us to do is more challenging: to reach people we think are unreachable; to change hearts that seem to us unchangeable, to overcome sins we've decided are too overwhelming. When we are ready to do the impossible things God wants to do, then the impossible becomes possible. So, what impossible thing are we praying diligently for God to do? What happens to faith if the impossible never makes it on to our prayer lists.

Well, we must consider perhaps the most difficult lesson of faith Abraham teaches us. *Faith remembers even when it seems God has forgotten.* We must brace ourselves for this disturbing truth about faith. Sometimes, walking by faith will feel like God has forgotten his promise, or even worse, forgotten us. Why does God allow his faithful to suffer? I don't know but clearly he does, sometimes for

long stretches. Joseph spent years in prison tempted to think God had forgotten him. Moses spent years in the desert tempted to think God had rejected him. David was pursued for years in the wilderness tempted to think God had changed his mind about choosing him to be King. God sometimes allows his faithful to get thrown around by the bad guys. Jeremiah gets thrown into a pit; Daniel gets thrown to the lions, his friends into the furnace. John the Baptist is thrown into a dungeon. Sometimes God allows the worst to happen. The apostle James and Paul get beheaded. Stephen gets stoned to death. Peter is crucified upside down. Many in the church are persecuted by Rome and the Jews for the first 200 years of its existence. Imagine trying to be faithful in Hitler's Germany; Stalin's Russia; Hirohito's Japan; Imagine living today in China or the Middle East or North Korea or Sudan as millions of believers do! Why does God allow the faithful to suffer? I don't know, but they do, they have and they will until he comes.

We modern American Christians are the extraordinary exception historically and geographically as we live in a time and place of unprecedented freedom and luxury and privilege. Still even for us the horrible happens. And when the horrible happens, when it seems God has abandoned his promise, it is Abraham again who reminds us what kind of faith it is that anchors us. *By faith Abraham when he was tested offered up Isaac and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son of whom it was said, Through Isaac shall your descendants be named.*

There is no more disturbing story in the Bible than this one. How could Abraham take his only son Isaac up on the mountain with full intention to kill him. Because Abraham had that kind of faith that remembers even when it seems God has forgotten. Abraham remembered God's promise and tells his servant at the foot of mount Moriah, "The boy and I will come back." Somehow, some way, God will be faithful to his promise. Faith does not require knowing how or why or when God will be faithful, only that God will be faithful. Scratched on the walls of a cellar in Cologne, Germany by a Jew hiding from Nazi persecution are the following words. *I believe in the sun, even when it does not shine; in love even when it is not shone, in God even when he does not speak.*

God chooses Abraham to begin a new nation, a different kind of nation, not a proud nation eager to make a name for themselves, but a humble, nation faithfully waiting to see how God will make their name great. This is the kind a nation that will bless the world, not by their own greatness but by their faith in the greatness of their God. Abraham's story is a model for our own emerging faith. So, where is our faith today? Are we having difficulty believing that what God promises to give us is worth leaving behind whatever we have. Or what God promises to give us is worth waiting a lifetime to receive. Or what God promises to give us is possible even when it seems impossible. Or what God promises to give us he will faithfully give us even if it seems for the moment he has forgotten

us. If so, let the story of Abraham remind us, as did the Creation story, of what kind of God we have and what kind of faith he wants us to have. I close with the words of the apostle Peter. *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade --kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith --of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire --may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you've not seen him, you love him; though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

O for a faith like that! a faith that will not shrink, though pressed by every foe, that will not tremble on the brink of any earthly woe! That will not murmur nor complain beneath the chastening rod, but, in the hour of grief or pain will lean upon its God. Lord, give me such a faith as this and then, whate'er may come, I'll taste, e'en here, the hallowed bliss of an eternal home.