



St. Peter's Lutheran Church

Pursuing God in Isolation

Session One: Isolated in Faith

Genesis 12:1-8

MAIN POINT

Abraham was isolated in receiving the call of God and believing God's promises for his future. Still, he responded in faith over fear and unbelief.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

When was a time you felt alone, even if in a crowd of people?

What are some ways you currently feel isolated from others, whether literally or figuratively?

In this series, we will be considering the subject of isolation and the ways in which we are called to pursue God in the midst of experiencing isolation. Thankfully, the Bible records many instances of God's people experiencing a sense of isolation from God and others at various moments. We will look to these instances to consider specific ways God's people have been tempted to turn from Him in isolation and how we might fight this temptation in our own lives. Though it is difficult, we are called to continually pursue God in seasons of isolation and we can be comforted that He is continually pursuing His people. Today, we will begin by looking at the call of Abram and the temptation he may have experienced to feel alone as he sought obedience to this call.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| READ GENESIS 12:1-8.

Imagine you were Abram. What would have been comforting about God's words in verses 1-3? Exciting? Frightening?

Does our culture make it easy or difficult to respond to the kind of call Abram received from God? Why?

How might Abram have experienced a sense of isolation in receiving this call from God?

To do all God called him to, Abram had to let go of his community, security, and identity. The faith Abram needed to succeed in the future was the same faith he needed to trust God with the changes he faced in the present. When we find ourselves in new seasons of life, apprehension, uncertainty, and fear can fill our minds. Only faith in God's promise enables us to survive and to thrive.

To Abram these promises must have seemed extravagant and unlikely. His wife was barren. How could he be the father of a great nation if he could not produce one son? How could his name be great on the earth if there was no son to carry it on after he died? Up to this point in his life, Abram had never owned a piece of land. How could he come to have this promised land that God spoke of?

In receiving these words, Abram very likely felt a sense of isolation. No one could relate exactly to how he felt because no one else had received this same call. In times of isolation, we are often tempted to respond in fear and unbelief, yet, like Abram, God invites us to respond to Him in faith.

What qualities do you think allowed Abram to follow God's calling? What qualities did Abram have that you would need in order to demonstrate the same obedience?

What blessings would Abram have missed if he had refused to follow God? What blessings might you miss if you refuse to respond to God's call when you are feeling isolated?

Since God promised to show Abram the land, God would go with and ahead of Abram on his journey of faith. Abram's faith and trust were in God's words, presence, and leadership, not in his own knowledge. Though Abram didn't know where he was going, he knew who was leading him.

Why was it important for Abram to build altars along his route and not wait until his final destination? How might we build "altars" like this in our own lives?

How might setting up these markers in our lives encourage us toward faith in future times of isolation?

Abram responded to God's promise with an act that would become a trademark of his life—he built an altar where God had appeared to him in Shechem and a second altar in Bethel to worship Him. Abram was aware of God's guidance in his life and responded with due reverence and respect. By setting up reminders of God's past faithfulness in our lives, we are encouraged toward future faith in Him as we recall His work, even in the most difficult seasons.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

In what ways might comfort, security, or other people be keeping you from eagerly following God's call?

What season can you conclude God has you in at this time? What needs to change in order for you to make the most of this season?

How might you encourage others who feel isolated currently? What are some creative ways you might use technology to do so when you are unable to be physically present?

PRAYER

Close in prayer thanking God that you are never really alone because He is always with you. Ask Him to lead you to respond to Him in faith over fear and unbelief in times of isolation.

COMMENTARY

| GENESIS 12:1-8

Verse 1. People have told a lot of stories about what Abram must have been like before God called him. We don't know anything about Abram except his family line, but possibly the Bible is quiet about his life before this so we can learn that God uses ordinary people to fulfill His purposes. Abram was born sometime about 1750 B.C. or earlier (Some scholars date his birth as early as 2165 B.C.) in Ur, a large city in what is now Iraq. We do not know Abram's occupation, but after entering Canaan he owned large herds of animals. Before God's call came to him, Abram and Sarai traveled with his family, intending to move from Ur to Canaan. They got as far as Haran, a city over 400 miles northeast of Jerusalem, and settled there for a time. Sometime

later they began traveling again. God called Abram, at age 75, to be the “father of the faithful.” God planned to bless all humankind, and He wanted a human being through whom He would bless both human beings and creation. Abram and Sarai were childless; now they were homeless. They were willing to travel. They had done so before. But this time God had called them to leave their home and their relatives. God told them to give up their present security, where they felt they belonged, to leave their family who would help them in need. God called Abram to go, but not in hopelessness nor fear. He called him to go in faith. God intended to give Abram and Sarai much, but they had to let go of something first.

Verse 2. Notice the number of times God said “I” in verses 1-3. God was not being self-centered. He was showing Abram (and us) that the real power behind the command and the promise was God. Abram was a person of faith but more importantly, God has power and authority to command obedience and promise a blessing. God answered their plea. They would be parents, even parents of a nation. They would produce a human nation through a son born to them, and they would be parents of a spiritual nation through their faith. God’s promise was to bless Abram so he could be a blessing to others. Blessing is a significant theme in the Old Testament. A blessing could simply be a pleasant greeting in the form of praise or wishing a person well (Gen. 14:19). Or, a blessing could be a mysterious invocation in which a person with power spoke words that brought good upon another. (Gen. 27 describes a struggle for this kind of blessing.) God’s promise to bless Abram meant He intended to do good to him. He would make Abram’s name well-known and respected. Even more, Abram would be a person through whom God would restore His relationship with and bless many others.

Verse 3. In the days ahead Abram would be a touchstone. The way people related to Abram affected how God dealt with them. That did not mean Abram would lead a charmed life. He was still human. He would sin, misunderstand, fail, and triumph. Yet, God did determine to care for Abram. Pharaoh (Gen. 12:10-20), Canaanite kings (Gen. 14), and the king of Gerar (Gen. 20) discovered God’s hand was on him. The greatest blessing, though, was beyond Abram’s expectation and sight. One of Abram’s descendants was Jesus Christ. God’s greatest blessing to the families of the earth is eternal salvation through Jesus, the Son of God, a son of Abram (see Matt. 1:1). Abram heard in a general way what God wanted to do in Abram’s world through him. Without knowing the details, he obeyed in faith.

Verse 4. The Bible recorded Abram’s response in a simple, profound manner. Abram left, as the LORD had told him. God had made wonderful promises to Abram, but leaving his family and moving into the unknown still would have been a difficult decision. Abram stepped out in faith. His decision to obey God has provided an inspiring, challenging example of obedience through

the centuries and still inspires and challenges us today. Obedience is not just for the young. No matter what age we are, God calls us to obey so we can experience a life of fellowship with Him.

Verse 5. Those who journeyed to Canaan with Abram constituted a large group with significant possessions. Naturally Abram's wife Sarai accompanied him, but his nephew Lot also joined him. Through the years Abram had accumulated many possessions, including cattle and sheep. Also he had many people working for him to care for his domesticated animals. His servants also had families, so the group consisted of at least several hundred people who traveled slowly toward their destination.

Verse 6. Abram traveled southwest through Syria and then south through Canaan. Entering Canaan, he passed into the north central part of the country and arrived in Shechem. Shechem lay on the slope of Mt. Ebal in the hill country at the juncture of several important roads. The great tree of Moreh probably served as a worship site for Canaanites. Moreh means "instruction" and its name suggests pagan peoples came to this "oak of instruction" seeking a divine word. Abram came to the oak but did not seek a divine word from pagan gods. He had heard clearly and had obeyed the word from the true God. Since Canaanites inhabited the land, Abram could not immediately possess the land. Yet in His good time God would give Abram's descendants the land.

Verse 7. Here, where pagans believed their gods communicated with them, the true God again spoke to Abram. God confirmed His promise of the land but stated Abram's descendants would possess it rather than Abram. When Abram died, he owned only a field with a cave (23:14-20) and had only a few descendants. Later under Joshua, God kept His promise enabling Abram's numerous descendants to possess the land. Abram responded to God's confirmation of His promise by building an altar and worshiping. He had arrived in the land and had seen part of God's gracious gift to his descendants. Although the fulfillment of the promise lay in the future, Abram gave thanks to God. He trusted God to guide him and fulfill His promises.

Verse 8. Leaving Shechem, Abram journeyed further south before stopping in the hills east of Bethel. The cities of Bethel and Ai lay close to one another and north of Jerusalem. Abram stayed in the countryside between the cities, perhaps hoping not to create tension between his large group and the cities' inhabitants. Again Abram built an altar to God and worshiped. Bethel would be an important religious center for Israel. There Jacob saw angels ascending and descending a stairway to heaven (28:10-22). The Ark of the Covenant rested in Bethel for a time (Judg. 20:18,27). After Israel divided into two kingdoms, Jeroboam built a shrine so people of the Northern Kingdom could worship there (1 Kings 12:29-33). And Today. Abram consistently found times and places to worship God. As believers we also are to worship God regularly. Just

as we choose whether or not to attend a worship service or have private worship times at home, we also choose whether we will genuinely worship. As worship blessed and strengthened Abram, so also worship helps us thank and praise God and mature in our faith.