

Call and Response

Genesis 12:1-4

There are many different kinds of calls. Some are good. Some are bad. Some we respond to. Some we try to ignore. There are of course, all kinds of telephone calls. If you are expecting a call, you may rush to answer the phone, or you may just let it go to voicemail. Then there are those calls that come at 2:00 in the morning. Those are never good. Perhaps it is the call from an old friend that you hadn't talked to in years, or it's the call where a kind stranger says, "Yeah, I found a wallet with this number in it, and it appears to have all the money and cards in it". Now there's a call you like to receive.

There's the call you get when the coach calls you into the game, but there is also the call into the principal's office. When I was at Ozark, some of my classmates were called to active duty, and were sent to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iraq. We were all glued to the television sets in the dorm lobbies as for the first time war was waged on live television.

There are calls from the IRS. There is the call that your lost pet has been found. Teresa and I received a call in which we were told that we had won a free vacation to the Bahamas, they only needed our credit card number to secure a \$500 registration fee. Yeah, right.

Yes, there are all different kinds of calls. But this morning I want to talk about still a different kind of call- the call of God. There is one call that we all receive that is more important than any others. The N.T. tells us about various aspects of God's call upon our lives.

- Rom 1:6 we are called to belong to Jesus
- 8:28 according to his purpose
- 1 Cor 1:2 to be holy
- 1:9 into fellowship with Jesus
- 7:15 to live in peace
- Gal. 5:13 to be free
- Eph. 1:18 hope
- Col. 3:15 peace
- I Tim 6:12 eternal life
- I Pt. 2:21 suffer for righteousness
- 3:9 to repay insult with blessing and to inherit blessing.

All of these verses come under the umbrella of a single call, the call of God to sinners unto Himself. God's call goes out to all people, but we must respond in faith. 4,000 years ago there was a man who heard and answered this call. His name was Abram. We know him today as Abraham. The N.T. tells us that Abraham was the prototype of all who would respond to God's call in faith. He was the first to make the journey of faith, the same journey that you and I are on this morning.

Paul tells us in Rom. 4:11 that Abraham, “*is the father of all who believe.*” By looking at Abraham, we can learn many things about God's call for our own lives

God's call of Abraham was the first step in His plan to save humanity from sin. The first 11 chapters of Genesis chronicle an ever tightening downward spiral of sin, as people go from bad to worse. The story of Genesis is not evolution, but devolution. The situation is described in Genesis 6 this way, “*The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.*”

God judged this sinfulness through the flood, but the flood merely punished sinfulness. It didn't solve the problem of sin. It didn't restore sinful humanity to a relationship with God. To save people from sin, God would need to do something else. By calling Abraham, God chose one person out of sinful humanity and began to work towards a special purpose through him and his descendants. God began to prepare the way and ready the world for His Son, Jesus Christ. Salvation would eventually be offered to all people through faith in Jesus. By answering the call, and believing God, Abraham was the first to look to Christ in faith. God tells us in the New Testament that we are to follow in Abraham's footsteps in answering the call.

Please turn with me to Genesis 12:1-4 and let's look at God's call to Abraham.

¹ *The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.*

² *“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;*

I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

³ *I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*

⁴ *So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran.*

I. God's Command

Let's look at the call. The call consists of two basic parts, the command and the promise. God's call always involves command. If we are ever to have a relationship with God, we must recognize that as Creator, He has rightful power and authority over our lives. In sin, we snub our noses at God. We demand authority over our own lives, and recognize no one's power but our own. But saving faith responds to God's call by submitting to His rightful authority. The command comes in verse 1, “*Go from your country, your people and your father's household to*

the land I will show you.”

A. Go From

God's command to Abraham is to go. Now there are two sides to this coin— *to go from* and *to go toward*. Abraham is called to go from, leaving one set of things behind, and going toward something new. Before Abraham could realize God's plan for him, and see His promise, he had to leave his past behind. You cannot go on your journey of faith and take all your baggage with you.

A couple of years ago, Allison had an interesting school project. They were studying the westward expansion of the United States, and they talked about all the pioneers who went west in covered wagons. For their project, they had to decide what they would take with them in their covered wagon. They only had so much room and could carry only so much weight. Do you bring feed for your horses or hope they can eat along the way? How much food do you bring that you can eat now versus seed so you can eat later? Do you bring all the clothes you will need or do you bring a spinning wheel to make what you will need? You can bring all the tools you need to build a place when you get to there, but you won't have room for the nails you will need.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 7:14, “*Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life.*” There is not room on your spiritual journey to take all you baggage with you. If you want to find your way back to God, you have to leave it all behind.

Abraham is called to go from three things: his country, his people, and his father's household, that is his extended family. Talk about pulling up one's roots! He was to leave behind all that was familiar and known. He was to let go of those he knew and loved, his friends and family. He was called to turn his back on his life as he had known it, and head into the unknown with nothing to hang on to but the word of God and his belief in it. To teach him the way of faith, God called Abraham to leave his life and land of idolatry.

God's call to us doesn't usually require that we pull up our physical roots. We don't have to sell our house, quit our job, and move our family to be saved, although there are times in the journey of faith that our spiritual commitments requires that we change where we live, where we work, where we go to school, or that we break off some relationships.

God wasn't being mean to Abraham when he told him to leave his hometown, his people, and his relatives behind. His hometown was a wretched and wicked place. Females were forced to practice ritual prostitution. They worshiped idols; they sacrificed children as a part of their worship. His family would hold him back and hinder him. They would only be an evil influence in his life.

We will see in the coming weeks that Abraham did not obey God fully in this. He brought his dad with him, and it caused a delay of years. He brings his nephew, Lot with him, and it causes all sorts of problems for Abraham, and gets him entangled in some very nasty messes. When God called him to leave his relatives behind, he was looking out for Abraham. He was trying to protect and provide for him. Eventually, God will even call him to leave his name, Abram, behind, as God gives him a whole new identity and purpose and gives him a new name, Abraham.

If you want to pursue God, and have a relationship with your Creator, there will be some things in your life He will call you to get rid of. He will tell you to leave some things behind. He might even say there are some negative relationships that need to be left in the rearview mirror rather than ride in the passenger seat in your faith journey. It might not be easy. It might not make sense to you. God won't always explain himself. He didn't explain all this to Abraham. He just wanted Abraham to trust Him. But know this. God always has your best interest in mind. He is always looking out for you. He is always trying to protect you or provide for you.

There comes a time in every journey of faith, we must leave behind what is familiar and known. We must leave the moral place we are living. We must cut the influences that have shaped our sinful lives. God cannot build in you the life in faith, if you just stay where you are. The call of God always involves a separation. The Bible calls this repentance.

F.B. Meyer wisely points out the parallel of Abraham's leaving, and the leaving we are called to,

Nothing strengthens us so much as isolation and uprooting. Let a young man leave his country or be put into a responsible position or be forced to his own resources, and he will develop powers of which there would have been no trace if he had always lived at home...

But what is true of the natural qualities of the soul is preeminently true of faith. So long as we are quietly at rest amid favorable and undisturbed surroundings, faith sleeps as an undeveloped muscle within us- a thread, a germ, an idea. But when we are pushed out from all these surroundings, with no one but God to look to, faith grows suddenly into a steel cable, a monarch oak, a master principle of life.

So God calls us to leave. The journey of faith is greater than family, or friends, career, or education, or politics, especially when it comes to any moral or spiritual influence these things might have on our lives. This was Jesus' whole point in Mt. 10:37-39,

Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Paul writes in Colossians 3:5-10 of what we are called to leave behind:

⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸ But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

In our spiritual journey, we are all called to leave something old, so that we can go to something new.

B. Go Toward

God's command was not just to leave. The flip side of Go is that Abraham was going toward something. Leaving and going go together. God does not ask us to say “no” to one thing, without calling us to say “yes” to something else. The journey of faith cannot be made if you're only trying to leave something behind. You must also have a destination that you are eagerly pursuing. The easiest way to say no to the old life, is to say yes to the new life.

When Teresa and I bought our first house years ago, there were a lot of things that needed work, especially in the kitchen. We ripped out the old flooring; we ripped out the old counter top. We ripped out the old wallpaper. We ripped out the old woodwork. Our kitchen was stripped and bare. Was our work finished? No. Actually things were quite depressing at this point. It was quite ugly. We had to put in the new.

But this is where many people stop in their faith journey. They try to leave the old behind. They say “no” to old habits, old foolish choices, old ways of doing things, but they don't pursue the right things in their place. They rip out the old, but they don't go any further. This is not rewarding. This does not bring the joy of faith. Rather it is frustrating. And those Christians who are like this find that they get burned out. This is why so many continue to struggle with sin.

God never asks us to leave without giving us somewhere to go. It might not be known and familiar, but we can trust God's word. God never rips out the old, without wanting to put something new in its place.

II. God's Promise.

God's call involves not only command, but also promise. Just like leaving and going go together, so does God's command and God's promise. God does not always give us reasons for His command. He doesn't always tell you why He wants to leave this or that, or clarify why He

wants us to go to here or there, but his commands are almost always accompanied with a promise. Trusting and following God is never without its reward or blessing. God promises to make Abraham into a great nation and to bless all the peoples of earth through him.

Notice here that God doesn't give Abraham a reason. He doesn't tell him why. But God does not leave us wandering in the dark, or leave us with no hope. He gives a promise. The life of faith is not a joke that God won't let us in on. But some people see it this way. At church camp a couple of years ago, some of the high school kids were pulling a joke on the younger campers (story of the 2 polar bears that get separated on icebergs, and the radio punch line). But God's plan for our lives is never like that. So even when God doesn't give us reasons, he gives us promises. You can read throughout the Bible and find that almost everywhere God commands, he also promises.

There is something important we can learn about salvation here. Some see salvation as being the result of us making and keeping promises to God. God I promise to do this or to never do that, if you will only... But we are not saved by making promises to God, but by His promises to us.

God promises basically two things- to make him into a great nation and to make him a blessing to all the earth. Abraham was the father of the Jewish people, and was through this nation of people that God prepared the world for his plan of salvation and sent his Son, Jesus Christ, which was a blessing to all people. Had Abraham stayed in Ur, neither of these things would have happened. Only by leaving and going, did Abraham receive the promises of God.

The same is true with us. In Acts 2:38 we are called to repent from our sin, which is to leave it behind, and to be baptized into Christ, that is to go to him in an act of faith. But God also promises there the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. You see the new that God gives is always better than the old he takes out.

God also promises us to make us into a great nation and a blessing. Not an earthly nation, mind you, but a spiritual people. When you take the journey of faith, you do not travel alone; you are a part of great caravan of people called the church. The word church itself means *those who are called out*. We are those who have been called out. Wherever the church exists, and works, and loves, and lives, and ministers in this world that is where the great nation of God is.

In this way we are also a blessing. Through our faith and the church, God blesses the world. The most important way is the message of salvation that we take to the world. But we bless in many other ways. With every act of love, with every word of kindness we extend the blessing of God to a lost world. As a church this blessing is magnified. When, as a church, we help someone with their

utilities in Jesus' name, when we help them with food or gas, we are being a blessing. When you volunteer to help coach a little league team and you provide a Christian example and Christian witness, you are being a blessing. Whenever you serve in Jesus name, in the church and in the community, you are being a blessing.

I know as Christians we are not too thrilled about the state of things in the world today. We are not happy with the direction of things in our country, but we need to realize that without the people of God, things would be far worse. This is what being salt and light are all about. We are to flavor and illuminate the world with the blessing of God. And this happens when we look to God's promises, and cling to them, and strive for them, and live for them. That is the journey of faith, and that is how we should respond to the call of God.

We see here the call of God, a call that is a command- a command to leave and to go- A call that is a promise. Now look at verse 4. Three simple words, "So Abram left." Have you responded to God's call? Have you answered?

The greatest destination God gives us is Himself. The point of salvation and the journey of faith aren't just that we replace bad habits with good habits, or foolish choices with wise choices. The ultimate thing God wants us to pursue is Him, through a relationship with Jesus.

Many get sidetracked in their spiritual journey at this point, because their pursuing lots of good things, but they're not pursuing the most important thing. They are pursuing being a good husband or a good wife. They are pursuing being a good parent. They are pursuing being a good person or a good church member, but they are not pursuing a relationship with Jesus. I leave the past behind, because I love Jesus. I say 'no' to these things, because I want to know Him.

We have to leave, but we also have to go. Two questions each one of us needs to ask this morning is what have I left? and where am I going? Are you comfortable with your answers? Do you have some things riding in the passenger seat of your life right now that you need to leave on the side of the road? Where is God calling you?

But perhaps you have not answered God's call at all today. It goes out, but not forever. You may say 'no' so much you will deafen the ears of your heart to the message. I ask you this morning to answer the call. Jack Cottrell writes, "Because God cares; he calls-and he calls, and calls, and calls... Are you listening?"