

BY FAITH ABRAHAM OBEYED (1)

A Meditation on Genesis 12:1-4; Hebrews 11:8-10

The God of glory appeared to Abram, and the command was very clear, “Go!” This imperative had a three-fold requirement: Go from your country, go from your kindred, and go from your father’s house. The command increased in intensity as each requirement became more and more intimate. It’s one thing to leave your land, but another to leave your relatives, and then finally your own father.

Abram is called to go to the land God will show him. But when he first set out he didn’t have any idea where he was going. Abram was to trust that step by step God would direct his path. The writer of Hebrews informs us, “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going” (Heb. 11:8). Abram went out despite the fear of the unknown.

Following God’s command with a three-fold requirement, came God’s promise with a three-fold blessing. “And I will make of you a great nation...I will bless you and make your name great...I will bless those who bless you...” (Gen. 12:2-3). God gave a command and then a promise of blessing. A.W. Pink commented on this connection, and the more I thought about what he said, the more I realized how profound it was, and how immense its implications were for preaching and living the Christian life. This is what Pink said, “The Lord’s commands are rarely accompanied with *reasons* but they are always accompanied with *promises*, either exprest or understood” (*Gleanings in Genesis*, p. 142).

It seems to me that this distinction between reason and promise is extremely important. When God commands His people to do something, what generally is our knee-jerk reaction? “Why, Lord?” And implied in that question is that audacious demand, “God, give me one good reason why I should do what your calling me to do.” The modern trend in preaching, by some of the most celebrated pastors in America, is to show “the wisdom of God.” In other words, explain the rationale behind the commands of God, so people can see that these commands are wise commands, and any thinking person would really be a fool not to obey this or that command. So the appeal is made to our common-sense reasoning.

For example, the seventh commandment, thou shalt not commit adultery, might include this three point outline:

- I. Do not commit adultery because you would hurt your spouse.
- II Do not commit adultery because you would hurt your children.
- III. Do not commit adultery because you would hurt yourself.

In the course of this message the congregation (or audience, as they are often called) would be reminded of the brutal affects of adultery, such as a loss of trust with one’s spouse that could take years to restore. Mention would be made to the forfeiture of respect from the children. And of course there would have to be a reference made to STDs and AIDS. “So,” the modern pastor concludes, “avoid adultery like the plague; God in His wisdom knows that great harm would come to your marriage, your family and your own person if you were to indulge in such behavior. God’s commands are reasonable. Let’s close in prayer...”

Who can argue with such a reasonable command? Even unbelievers can see “the wisdom of God”; even atheists can’t deny the validity of the pastor’s three points. In fact, the attraction of this type of preaching (or talk) is that it appeals to everyone, including unbelievers *without faith*. But remember what Hebrews 11:8 says? It doesn’t say, “By the reasonableness of God’s command Abraham obeyed.” Rather, it says, “By *faith* Abraham obeyed.” If Abraham had relied on reason or common-sense alone, do you think he would have obeyed? I doubt it. On the contrary, reason probably insisted that he stay put. After all, his business was already firmly established in Ur. His family was there. His wife’s family was there. All his security was there.

Part of the difficulty with showing “the wisdom of God” is that not all of God’s commands will seem reasonable. What good reasons could be given to unbelievers for tithing? What good reasons would you have given John G. Paton to go to New Hebrides, where the previous missionaries were eaten by the cannibals? In Genesis 22 God will call Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. What good reasons would you have given to Abraham to obey that command—apart from faith? Obedience to many commands is impossible without faith.

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When God called Abram to leave Ur, He wasn't testing Abram's ability to think rationally; rather he was testing his faith and his love for God. Second Corinthians 5:7 is basic, yet essential to the Christian life: "we walk by faith, not by sight." There are certain commands and callings that you will never be able to "reason" yourself into obeying.

When the rich, young ruler came to Christ looking for salvation, what did Jesus say? He said, "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Lk. 18:22). "Liquidate all your assets." Does that sound reasonable? Did Jesus demonstrate the wisdom of God in what He was asking? No, but He did attach a promise: "and you will have treasure in heaven." Once again, I think we have an example of an *unreasonable* request—from a human perspective—that can only be followed if one has faith in God and believes the promise.

I find it interesting, and puzzling, that so many "Christian" books are being marketed to and purchased by unbelievers. Years ago we had cross-over music with Amy Grant. Now it seems that we have cross-over books, like books on leadership. Why, one has to wonder, do these books appeal to unbelievers? When it comes to many of the books on leadership, the answer is plain: they're basically Harvard business principles found in the Scriptures that are void of the need for faith and reliance upon God.

Don't misconstrue what I'm saying, God's commands are reasonable—if you have the mind of Christ—and we should lay out their reasonableness, yet it is the pastor's job to preach God's Word, which God uses to bring forth faith and to strengthen faith. Then the pastor challenges God's people to trust Him and live by faith. Don't forget Hebrews 11:6: "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."

God is continually testing our faith, and taking us through fiery trials to refine our faith. Peter wrote, "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:6-7). Take note of how precious our faith is to God.

The righteous shall live by faith (Rom. 1:17) and, simultaneously, not check their brains at the door. Many commands exhort us to think and to grow in knowledge. Paul told Timothy, "Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything" (2 Tim. 2:7). Peter's second epistle ends with the admonishment, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ..." (2 Pet. 3:18). And the greatest commandment is: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). Christians should, thus, be the best thinkers and scholars on God's green earth. Faith and rigorous thinking are not mortal enemies, but beloved friends. The problem enters when so-called reason undermines faith.

Adam and Eve were called, as we all are, to live by faith. "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die'" (Gen. 2:16-17). Satan challenged this command, and told Eve, "You will not surely die" (3:4). "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that it was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate" (3:6). If I can paraphrase, Eve thought, "Judging by the looks of this tree, there's no good reason why I shouldn't eat of its fruit." As a result, she disobeyed God and disregarded His promise of certain death. Part and parcel of Eve's deception was the embracing of reason over faith in God's Word.

In closing, let me ask, "Is there anything God is calling you to do—by faith—that you are reasoning yourself out of? Like joining the church or tithing or leading your family in worship? Few things hinder God from working in our lives like a lack of faith. This teaching has been abused, nevertheless Scripture plainly teaches us about the importance of faith. Jesus didn't do many mighty works in Nazareth, because of their unbelief (Matt. 13:58). Therefore, let's all cry out to God, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mk. 9:24).

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