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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes

INTRODUCTION

Within the last five years, the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board conducted a study determining that there is widespread biblical illiteracy among Southern Baptists. None of us should be proud of it. There was a series of simple questions asked of a wide range of Southern Baptist Christians and one of the questions the majority of Southern Baptist Christians missed was the simple question, "In the Bible who came first, Abraham or Moses?" I know some of you had to think about that a little bit too, didn't you. The majority of Southern Baptists failed that question. This is not a joke. I'm not going anywhere with it. It's just sad to know there is that level of spiritual and biblical illiteracy in our churches. Last week we talked about Noah and I told you the first ten generations of human history can be characterized in these words: the creation, then the curse, then the catastrophe.

After Noah and his descendants populated the earth again, the next big event is what we could name "The Call," because God called out a people unto himself and Abraham is the key character. Abraham is unusual in that he is the only human individual in human history revered by Islam, Judaism and Christians. All three religions revere and respect Abraham. The Muslims trace their heritage back to Abraham through Ishmael. The Jews trace their heritage back through Abraham and as Christians we also believe Abraham was as the Bible says "the father of the faithful and the friend of God." I will be preaching three messages about Abraham and it's hard to believe I'm going to try to cover the whole life of Abraham with three messages. Tonight we'll talk about the beginning episodes of his life and the title of the message is based on that little song that we all learned in Bible School.

Father Abraham had many sons
Many sons had father Abraham.

Today we're going to see that father Abraham also had many sins. He wasn't perfect. That's why we know the word of God was not written by men. It is written by God, because if man had been writing this, they would have glossed over all the failures and all the mistakes.

I. ABRAHAM'S SAVING RESPONSE

The first thing I want to talk about is Abraham's saving response, because when God calls, the way you respond determines whether or not you are saved.

Genesis 12:1. "The Lord had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.'"

1. God's command

As we talk about Abraham's saving response, the first thing we want to talk about is God's command. God called Abram and said, "Abraham, I have a job for you." Now, I'm going to be using the words Abram and Abraham interchangeably, even though I understand as you understand that to begin with his name was Abram, which means literally *high priest* but not in the terms that we would call a high priest. It literally would be "prince of height." It probably

described Abraham because he was a tall man. It could have been something as simple as that, but later he becomes Abraham, "prince of God." God said, "I want you to leave your country. I want you to leave your people. Leave your family and go to a land that I will show you." We're going to learn a tremendous lesson today about faith. Many times God calls us to leave our comfort zone and step out in faith. Faith is coming to the edge of everything we can hear, see, touch, taste and feel, coming to the edge of all we know and taking a step into the darkness, into the unknown and knowing one of two things is going to happen. 1) Either God is going to put something solid under us or 2) he's going to teach us to fly. That's what faith is—responding to God without having all the facts. It was an amazing call on Abraham's life for God just simply to say, "Abraham, I want you to just get up and leave and go."

What would you have done? I know what I would have said, "Go where? Where's the roadmap? I want to know where I'm going. I want to know how I'm going to get there and I want to know when I'm going to get there and I want to know what's going to be there when I get there!" I would really struggle with this. You don't know what a planning freak I am. Just ask my wife. I'm the kind that before we go on a vacation, I print out an itinerary of what we're going to do every day. It drives my family crazy. I want to have it mapped out. I would not have made a good Abraham. Abraham was willing to obey God. He was just simply willing to step out in faith. That was God's command. "Leave your comfort zone." Sometimes God calls us to do the same thing.

2. God's covenant

The second thing I want you to see is God's covenant with Abraham. God said to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3:

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

Has that promise been fulfilled? Yes it has! Every one of those promises has ultimately come true and some of them are still coming true, because the blessings of God are still poured out on people who believe the promise of God that came to the nation of Israel. Here's the amazing part of this promise. Abram had a wife but no children and we're going to see at this time he is 75 years old and here is God saying, "Listen, I'm going to make a whole nation out of your family." I imagine he was looking around and saying, "Well, God you're better get on with the job here!" God said, "This is my promise to you. This is the covenant I'm going to make with you."

3. Abraham's commitment

Notice now the final part of these next few verses, Abraham's commitment. This is his saving response to God's call.

Genesis 12:4-9. "So Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him; Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired

in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev."

The amazing thing about this is Abraham took off from Haran, Ur of the Chaldeans, finally, he came to the land of Canaan and God said, "This is it! This is where I am going to bless you and I'm going to give this land to you and your descendants." I hope all of you know now that every time you watch the news and there are reports of turmoil between the Palestinians and the Jews, that it is all based on that one promise! As the Jews have gone back to the nation of Palestine to modern-day Israel, they are claiming the promise God made to Abraham. They are saying, "The land is ours! The land was given to our father, Abraham. Of course the Palestinians are saying, "No the land is ours!" That's why they are fighting over the land over there, based upon this promise. As Abraham followed God, he began to worship God and he did several things.

It says in verse 8, "He pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and there he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord." I like the name, Bethel. It is two Hebrew words *Beth* meaning "house" and *el* meaning "God." Bethel is the house of God. A house is where someone resides, where the presence of someone can be found. So this place was called Bethel, because this is where Abraham experienced the presence of the Lord. He didn't just conjure the presence of the Lord. He went through the correct motions. He built an altar, made a sacrifice and called on the name of the Lord.

This is one of the first times in the Bible we are introduced to the Tetragrammaton, YHWH. Today, we often pronounce it Yahweh. Actually, we are not sure how they pronounced it, because in the Hebrew language there were no vowels, only consonants. Those four letters YHWH in the Bible always translated "the Lord." The Hebrews so revered YHWH they never pronounced it out loud. That's how holy it was. They would write it, but when they wrote and when their Hebrew scribes would copy it when they were copying the Hebrew text, they would stop and ceremonially cleanse themselves, and pray and fast when they came to the tetragrammaton. They also used a new quill to write YHWH and then threw that quill away—it would never be used for anything else. Then, they would continue their transcription. When they would come to that word again, they stopped and did the same thing. That's how holy and reverent the name of God was. It was so holy that when the Hebrews came to that name, they would not pronounce it. They never said, "YHWH," or however you pronounce it. They never spoke it. They always substituted the Hebrew word *Adonai*, which is translated "Lord." This is one of the first references to Abraham calling upon the name of the Lord. By the way, do you know that's where we get our word, Jehovah? That is the Germanized form of Yahweh.

I have told you this before but when some of these people who call themselves, "Jehovah's Witnesses" come knocking on your door saying God's name is Jehovah, you can say, "Well, yeah, that's the German translation of his name." That's how holy the name of God was to the Hebrews. That's Abraham's commitment to be willing to obey God and take off and go to

Canaan and receive God's promise meet God in worship and call upon the name of the Lord. That's why I call it, "His saving response" when God called him, he responded in faith.

Here's a Bible 101 question for you: "How were people in the Old Testament saved?" People in the Old Testament were saved the same way we are saved today. Some people still erroneously think, "Well, that was the dispensation of law, so people in the Old Testament were saved by keeping the Law." Wrong, because none of them kept the law. Romans tells us the only reason God gave us the law was to let us see that nobody could keep the law. Abraham's response of faith was the thing that saved him. We are going to see later that God considered it righteousness because he obeyed God. God imputed to him righteousness because of his obedience. We are saved the same way. When God's call is upon your life to trust Jesus in faith to leave the land into which you were born, the land of your lost, sinful condition the land by the way in which most Americans live and live very happily. When God calls you to leave that land, and to step out and follow him in faith and go into a new kind of existence and a new kind of living you have never experienced before, when you step out in faith and follow God and obey God and meet God and worship God, you are responding the same way Abraham did in faith. That's why I call it, "His Saving Response."

II. ABRAHAM'S SINFUL RELAPSE

I have discovered a lot of us start out getting fired up about Jesus and everything is going along fine for a while but we come to a place where we backslide and we get out of fellowship with God. That happened in the life of Abraham. So the second thing I want to look at tonight is Abraham's sinful relapse." He fell into sin.

Genesis 12:10-20. "Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, 'I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.'"

Notice Abraham had two motives for him wanting her to do that. "I want them to treat me well and I don't want to die."

"When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman and when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace."

You can read between the lines all you want to there. I'm not going to speculate. That's probably a reference to the practice in those days of a pharaoh adding another good-looking female to his harem. She went.

"He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep, cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels."

Pharaoh was paying Abram a dowry for his sister. Have you found it to be true when you get off in sin there is always an accounting?

"But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife, Sarai. So Pharaoh summoned Abram. 'What have you done to me?' he said. 'Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!' Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had."

1. He departed from God's plan

Last week when we were talking about Noah, I told you Noah was a great, faithful man, yet he ended his life with a dark chapter. Here is a great father of the faith who has a chapter of failure. Notice the three mistakes I believe Abram made. This is why I am calling this message, "Father Abraham Had Many Sins." First, he departed from God's plan. God said, "I want you to leave your home and I want you to travel to the land that I show you." Abram came to Canaan and God showed him the land and said, "This is it! This is the land Canaan!" but when disappointment, discouragement and distractions came, when a famine came, Abram left. He says, "You know what? I think I can come up with a better plan than God had. God brought me to this land of Canaan and there's a famine here! God must not know what he is doing so I'm going to take matters into my own hands and I am going to go down there to Egypt where I think I can feed myself and feed my family!" Have ever done that with your life? God has led you to a certain place a certain direction and you get there and say, "This can't be it, because there are too many problems. There is a famine here and surely God wouldn't lead me into a famine!" and you say, "Okay. I'm going to go off and I'm going to do Plan B" and you go down to Egypt. All the way in the Bible the land of Canaan is always a type of God's fullness, God's best, and Egypt is always a picture of sinful bondage. One sin leads to another. Had Abram stayed in Canaan, he never would have gotten into these other sins.

2. He lied

Here's the second mistake he made: He fabricated a lie. There is a reference in chapter 22 that leads us to believe Sarai really was his half sister. But we don't know whether it's part of another lie or if it's a statement of fact, but it is possible Abram and Sarai had the same father but different mothers but they were married anyway. If that is true, we would call what he said in Egypt a "half-lie." Have you ever been guilty of what we call a half-lie or a white lie? When I was a teenager, one of my friends called me and said, "Hey, we're going to go out and run around tonight, and do some things and we want you to come with us. Can you come?" At that time I was still of the age that I asked my parents. They said, "No, we don't want you doing that. We don't want you going out and messing around with these kids." "Aww, mom! Aww, dad!" I called my friend back and said, "I can't do it." My friend said, "Well, why don't you just tell them we're just going to go to the Tastee Freeze?" I went in and said, "Okay, mom. I'm not going to do that with my friends, but another friend called me and he wants me to go to the Tastee Freeze with him. Can I do that?" They said, "Okay, that's fine." My friend came by and got me and we went to the Tastee Freeze and then we went out with those other friends and

messed around. I came back in later that night and my parents asked, "Where have you been?" I said, "Tastee Freeze." Now, that was true, wasn't it? Absolutely! But it was a lie because it was a half truth. It wasn't the whole truth and the reason this was a lie is because Abraham told a half-truth and his intent was to deceive. "Oh, what tangled webs we weave when first we practice to deceive."

3. He was blinded by possessions

Have you ever discovered when you tell a lie, you have to tell two lies to cover that lie? Then, you have to tell four lies to cover those two lies to cover that one lie? Then, you have to tell eight lies to cover those four lies to cover those two lies to cover that one lie? If you lie very much, you had better have a good memory! The best thing to do is just tell the truth. That way you don't have to remember what you said. But Abram lied about his wife. The reason he did it really leads to his third mistake: He was blinded by possessions. You may read that story and say, "Well I know why he did what he did—he didn't want to die! He went down there and said 'This is my sister' because he was really afraid they would kill him if they found out she was married to him. We don't have any reference of that being a widespread practice. Probably one of his main motives was simply materialism. "Here is a good-looking woman I am married to and I can transpose her beauty into money. If I tell pharaoh she is my sister, he's going to pay me off BIG TIME. To put it indelicately he says, "If I can just pimp my wife, I can get a lot of money" and it worked! He raked it in and became blinded by his possessions. Here was Abraham the man called by God "the father of the faithful," "friend of God," falling into a dark chapter of his life.

III. ABRAHAM'S SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

The third thing we are going to look at tonight is Abraham's spiritual renewal. I want you to see what Abraham did to get back on track with God.

1. He devoted himself to God

The first thing he did was to devote himself to God. After pharaoh kicked him out and there had been all kinds of plagues and diseases, he finally saw the light and devoted himself to God. "So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev." (Genesis 13:1) The Negev is the southern tip of Canaan, the Promised Land. If you wanted to, you could preach a whole message on these three points: his response, his relapse, and his renewal on those three little phrases where it says in Genesis 13:1 that "Abram went forth." When you go forth, that's usually a picture of faith, but then when he went to Egypt, it says he "went down." Then, in chapter 13:1, it says "he went up." That's a picture of what happens to people spiritually. When God calls you, you go forth—that's the right direction but if you're not careful, you'll go down, and you'll backslide. If you have done that, what you need to do is do what this says and go back up.

Genesis 13:1-4 "He went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold. From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier and where he had first built

an altar. There Abram called on the name of the Lord.”

Most of you have heard my testimony before and you know I was saved when I was 8 years old and I was really genuinely born again. I can remember as young boy trying to introduce my friends to Jesus. I was sitting on the back row of our church after I had been saved and my friends were not listening or paying attention to the sermon, so I said to my friend, “Greg, listen to what he is saying!” because Greg wasn’t saved. “Greg, listen to the preacher. You need this!” As a little kid I didn’t know the message, but at least I could tell my friend to listen to the message. When the invitation was given for people to come and get saved, I would stand there and I would turn to Greg and say, “Greg, don’t you want to get saved? I’ll walk down with you!” I had some zeal even when I was a kid.

Then when I got into the first few years of high school, I went down to Egypt. I got away from God. Most of you who have heard my testimony know that it got pretty bad there for a while. I let go of God, but God never let go of me! After some real disasters, I finally went back and I called on the name of the Lord again. I called upon God again just like it says there in verse 4 “Abram called on the name” you can just add the word a-g-a-i-n! *Again* he called on the name of the Lord. He came back to God just like I came back to God. Many of you have done the same thing. He devoted himself to God.

2. He demonstrated unselfishness to Lot

I want you to see he had some repentance and change in his life, because Abraham demonstrated unselfishness with Lot. We see he has changed and is no longer blinded by wealth. In verses 5-13 Abram says to Lot, “Okay, Lot, there are too many people in your family and your servants and my family and my servants so we’re going to have to divide up. I’m going to let you choose first. Whatever land you want as far as you can see you choose first. Whatever’s left over that’s what I’ll take. That represents a total departure from his attitude in the past of wanting to get the best and the most for himself. Lot took the portion of the land that faced the two cities with the brightest lights and the loudest music. One was named Sodom and the other was Gomorrah but that’s another chapter. Abram said, “Okay, you take that and I’ll take what’s left over.” Possessions and materialism can blind you to God. When there is a sign of true repentance in your life, no longer are you enamored with things, you only have eyes for God!

3. He dedicated himself to obedience

The final step he took in his spiritual renewal was he dedicated himself once again to obedience and that’s the key. “I’m going to obey God.”

Genesis 13:14-18. “The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, ‘Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.’ So Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the Lord.”

Again God says, "Okay, Abraham, you're back on track. I can bless you once again." God probably—I say probably, because we'll never know God—would have fulfilled his promise with Abraham years earlier but because of Abraham's disobedience and backslidden condition, God couldn't bless him. Finally, when Abraham got back on track and turned back to the Lord and went back to the land of promise and built an altar and called upon the name of the Lord, God says, "Okay, I can bless you now! I can bless you because you are obedient to me." You need to learn a lesson. Here's the parallel: When you come to Christ and put your faith in Christ and you follow him, that's when God's blessings start pouring out in your life. God says to you, "Listen, when you follow me, if you stay on track and you stay in the center of my will, I'll keep blessing you, I'll keep blessing you, I'll keep blessing you!" And the blessings are mixed. There are all different kinds of blessings but when you get off track and backslide and you go down to Egypt in a time of rebellion, God says, "I'm not going to bless you while you are disobedient." When you get back on track, he'll bless you.

To me the greatest New Testament parallel to Abraham is the story Jesus told in Luke 15. We call it the story of the prodigal son, but I think it is really the parable of the loving father. We've often thought the focus of that story is the son who runs away, but I think Jesus' intent there is the focus on the *father*, because the father lets his son leave and doesn't go after him but the father is grieved. God loves you. He's your father. But if you insist on running off in disobedience and rebellion, he'll let you go. Then, like Abraham, the prodigal son went down into sin until he ended up in the muck and mire with all of those pigs. Did you notice the father did not go down into the mud hole and get his son out? He probably wanted to. That's what we would have done in our human weakness, but the father waited. The turning point in that story Jesus told was when that young man came to his senses and said, "I will arise and I will go back to my father." The beautiful part of that story is when it says when the old father saw his son coming back, he RAN to meet him! It's the only time in the Bible that ever pictures God as running. Sometimes you miss what happens after that. He put a ring on his finger that represents "son ship," he put a robe on his back, and he killed the fatted calf. All of those blessings had been his all along, but it wasn't until he got up and came to his senses and went back to his father that he experienced them.

How many blessings do you think God is holding in store for you right now and the only reason you are not experiencing them is because you are down in Egypt or you are over in that mud pit or you, like Abraham, have gotten away from God's plan? Do yourself a favor! Come back to God tonight! Come back to Bethel and call upon the name of the Lord again.

OUTLINE

I. ABRAHAM’S SAVING RESPONSE

1. God’s command
2. God’s covenant
3. Abraham’s commitment

II. ABRAHAM’S SINFUL RELAPSE

1. He departed from God’s plan
2. He lied
3. He was blinded by possessions

III. ABRAHAM’S SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

1. He devoted himself to God
2. He demonstrated unselfishness to Lot
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