

Text: Genesis 12:4-20

Title: "Walking the Path to a Better Country"

Time: April 27, 2008 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: We are a country of immigrants, and perhaps no national monument reminds us better of this fact of national history than does the Statue of Liberty at Ellis Island in New York City. In the years prior to our reception of the statue from France, fundraising efforts were undertaken to build the pedestal for it. Emma Lazarus, a Jewish-American poet from New York, wrote her now famous poem, "The New Colossus," to be auctioned off for this fundraising effort. Years later the poem was made a part of the monument's exhibition:

"Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
'Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!' cries she  
With silent lips. 'Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!'"

Our national forefathers understood what it meant to walk a path to a better country. This they had in common with our spiritual forefather Abraham. We have read the passage in Genesis 12 that we will be focusing on this morning, but I also want us to read the inspired commentary on this passage that is provided for us by the author of the book of Hebrews (11:8-10, 13-16). Clearly, there is more going on in Genesis 12 than

mere immigration. Abraham's migration to Canaan is full of spiritual lessons for us regarding how we ought to grow in the Lord—how we ought to walk the path to a better country in our own lives. I want to say three things about that.

I. The walk to a better country requires obedience to God's Word (v. 4-10, "according to that which Yahweh spoke to him").

Application: The author of the words we have just read was Moses. He no doubt wrote them while leading a people from Egypt to Canaan, who had trouble following him. Numbers 11 tells us what the people said who did not want to obey: "The rabble who were among them had greedy desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, 'Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to eat except this manna!'" (vv. 4-6).

As Moses writes of the obedience and disobedience of Abraham in Genesis 12, he emphasizes that obedience is connected with Canaan (vv. 5-6) and that disobedience is connected with being in Egypt (v. 10). He undoubtedly wants the complaining people he is leading to see that a desire for the food of Egypt is nothing new. And the antidote to such desires of rebellion is obedience to God's Word (v. 4). We need to settle on the truth that simple obedience is always the key to God's rich blessing. But we find reasons not to obey, just as the Israelites did, and just as Abram did. We see two common rationales for disobedience here:

A. Difficult circumstances can offer a rationale for disobeying God's Word (vv. 9-10, "the heavy famine in the land").

Application: As we read about this famine today, it can seem to us as though Abram's move to Egypt makes a lot of sense.

There is a rationale for going to Egypt here. Yet this rationale is very different from the one that put Abram in the land of Canaan in the first place (v. 4, “according to the Word of the Lord”). Remember that the first readers of this passage would have been exposed to it sometime after enjoying a hearty meal of manna. What was manna? One thing we know for sure is that manna was God’s supernatural provision in the midst of famine. The first readers of this text would have understood, in a way we might miss, that God will take care of the difficult circumstances if we simply are willing to obey. Do not let difficult circumstances become an excuse for disobedience. We have the supernatural empowerment of God to obey.

Illustration: We American Christians do not understand difficult circumstances the way our brothers and sisters in other countries do. We think that we cannot obey because we have not had enough therapy, or because someone hurt our feelings, or because we had to stay up late last night and watch our favorite TV show.

I read an article about the persecution of Baptists in Lebanon by Maronite Catholics as recent as 2006. The article said: “As the believers worshipped in their new building on that July morning a crowd began forming outside, led by the town mayor. The Christians heard cursing, threats, and then stones thrown by the angry mob against the walls and windows of the building. Pastor Raymon Abou-Mekhael went outside and was physically attacked by the mayor, who knocked off Raymond’s glasses and stomped on them. This was done under the watchful eye of several policemen who stood by doing little to prevent the violence. Church members from inside the building watched this attack on their pastor with fear and yet had the presence of mind to film the aggression. The furious horde then rushed into the church, breaking windows and stealing whatever was of value as church members helplessly stood by.” This happened repeatedly. The church was defamed publicly in the newspaper. Their assistant pastor is a

paralytic because he followed the call of God to plant a church in Mosul, Iraq, and while on the way to church one day with his mother, a band of terrorists riddled his car with bullets. Yet the church still thrives. Pastor Raymond explains: "They think that because they have cut the road to our building and hindered us from reaching our worship place that they have shut down our church. What they ignore is that our church exists regardless of the building. We exist because we are a group of living stones under the headship of Christ. In all the troubles and the attack the church did not stop one single service." What does it take to stop you and I from obeying?

B. Deceptive substitutes can offer a rationale for disobeying God's Word (v. 7, "your seed" vs. Lot; v. 7, "this land" vs. Egypt, note the idea of migrating as a refugee in vv. 9-10).

Application: Satan not only reminds us that it is difficult to obey God, he also tells us that we have other options — deceptive substitutes for obedience that seem to work better than obedience does. The passage before us contrasts Egypt as a deceptive substitute for Canaan in the life of Abram, and Lot as a deceptive substitute for Abram's seed (vv. 4-7).

One of the difficulties of the last days that has led much of Christendom to disobey God's word is described by the apostle Paul in 2 Tim. 4:3-4: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths." People want to be entertained at church, and churches that preach sound doctrine can expect to be smaller than churches that entertain.

How are we to respond to this kind of difficulty? Wish that we were bigger? Try to figure out what is wrong with our approach to sound doctrine? Figure out how to make things more entertaining around here? No, Paul says: "But you, be

sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." In other words, obey.

II. The walk to a better country requires the decision to begin (vv. 4-6).

Application: We are told Abram's age at six critical junctures of his life: (1) his departure from Haran (12:4, 75), the birth of Ishmael (16:16, 86), his circumcision and the ratification of the covenant (17:1-24, 90), the birth of Isaac (21:5, 100), and his death (25:7, 175). These were hallmarks of his life's decisions.

How old were you when you made the decision to obey the Lord and begin walking the path to a better country? For Abram the start of obedience involved moving to Canaan. For those of us in the church age, the Bible is very clear that the beginning of our obedience as Christians is our baptism. Disciples of Christ are to be baptized, and then taught all the other commandments of Christ (Matt. 28:19-20). Have you made this beginning decision to obey? Are you walking true to that decision today? I believe that Hebrews tells us a couple of things about Abram's quest for a better country that can make it difficult to make the decision to begin.

A. The decision to begin will often involve unanswered questions (Heb. 11:8, "not knowing where he was going").

Application: Often before we make the decision to give our future to the Lord and determine to do His will for our lives, a fear of the unknown can hold us back. We want to keep the reins in our hands and control the outcomes of the situations we face. We want the Lord to make an offer so that we can see whether or not we are going to like what He has in store. But God cannot be God and operate this way. He requires our trust, because He deserves our trust. He will not let us down, but He does ask us to give Him our lives even though we do not have all the questions about the future answered.

B. The decision to begin will often involve sacrifices (Heb. 11:9, 15).

Application: When we make the decision to follow the Lord we can expect to lose something. There are friends who are not going to be friendly anymore, business opportunities that may no longer be appropriate, favorite recreation venues that will have to go by the wayside. But as the Lord takes these things away, He teaches us that their replacements are far better—a better country was Abraham's goal, a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God (v. 10). God is molding a masterpiece as we walk to our better life with Him, and we need to be willing to count the losses and sacrifices along the way as a very small price to pay.

III. Walking the path to a better country requires faithful reliance on God (vv. 7-8).

Application: Reliance on God always begins with Jesus Christ. Our passage indicates this in two ways:

(1) We are told not only that Yahweh spoke to Abram in v. 7; we are also told that Yahweh appeared to him. This is a theophany—God allowed Abram to see Him in some visible form. This will happen again in Abram's life. For our purposes this morning, I want us to see that each time it does happen, it is Jesus Christ the Son of God whom Abram is seeing. John 1:18 tells us plainly, "No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him." God the Father is invisible not because He is transparent, but because He dwells in inapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16). The Mediator between God and man, the One who has seen the Father (John 6:46) and whose light shines in darkness so we can see (John 1:5), is Jesus Christ.

(2) The promise of land comes to Abraham's seed (12:7) prior to Abraham (13:17). Paul tells us the significance of this in Gal.

3:16. Abraham will get the land some day (Heb. 11:8), even though he never did in his life time (Heb. 11:13), because his descendant will get the land. Said differently, because Abraham's descendant was bodily resurrected, so will Abraham be bodily resurrected one day to enjoy the fulfillment of God's land promise to him.

All this to say that reliance on God always involves an encounter with the Mediator between God and man, the Lord whom Abraham saw, the Lord who became the son of Abraham, Jesus Christ. You cannot rely on God unless you do it through Him. Our passage teaches us some other important truths about reliance on God:

A. Reliance on people is a poor substitute for reliance on God (vv. 11-16).

Application: Only God can meet the need that we have for Him. When we begin to look to others for our well-being, we make a mistake and set ourselves up for sure disappointment.

B. Failure to rely on God is spiritually damaging (vv. 17-20, contrast God's command that Abram be a blessing in v. 2).

1. Notice Abram's impact on Sarai. One commentator believes that Pharaoh's admission, "I took her for my wife" requires that his marriage to Sarai was consummated. This was likely the case. The Lord struck Pharaoh because he was sleeping with Abram's wife (v. 17). Abram's failure to rely on God wrought consequences that were irreversible.

2. Note Abram's impact on Pharaoh. Pharaoh lost his health in the deal; but perhaps more importantly, he wanted nothing to do with Abram or Abram's God when this was all said and done. Abram lost his testimony to this ruler. God had commanded him to be a blessing, but he had failed, and so God had to curse someone who sincerely blessed Abram. As God's

people who understand the trustworthiness of our God, our failure to trust Him brings great hardening to the hearts of others who need to trust him too. Their blood is on our hands.

C. God is always reliable even when we are not (v. 17).

Application: This verse can be summed up with those first three words, "But the Lord." God brought Abram out of this mess. He is faithful even when we are faithless. Our salvation depends on His faithfulness to us, not our faithfulness to Him. Jesus never fails.

Conclusion: Do you remember having made a decision to begin walking to a better country this morning? If not, what is holding you back? Unanswered questions? The cost is too high? If so, you do not have the faith of Abram. Having made the decision to begin, are you obeying God's Word and faithfully relying on Him? Perhaps as Christians who have begun this journey we find ourselves again in Egypt making a mess of things. Jesus never fails. His forgiveness is sure. He is ready to restore us and get us back on the right path again. Let's trust Him that way today.

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*