



FOOTSTEPS OF FAITH: THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM

FAITH IS A HERBIVORE

Genesis 12:1-9

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Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵ And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord. ⁹ And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

Carnivores, Herbivores, Verbivores

Faith is a verbivore. And if carnivores are those who eat meat, and herbivores are those who eat plants, then verbivores are those who eat *words*.

Of course, we've all heard of carnivores. In fact, some of us are carnivores; I confess to being one myself. Carnivores are those who have a hard time driving by McDonald's and not being overtaken by an intense desire for a Quarter Pounder or a Big Mac.

Some of you, however, can drive right by McDonald's, or Burger King or Wendy's or Culvers or White Castle or even Five Guys, and have no emotional response whatsoever, save perhaps a deep aversion to grease and red meat. You're less carnivore, and more herbivore; a plant-eater,

or what we typically call a vegetarian. You'd prefer a Caesar salad for lunch, save the anchovies, or a thin-crust cheese pizza with tomatoes and mushrooms, hold the sausage and pepperoni, thank you.

Sometimes carnivores look down their nose at herbivores; they wonder why one would go for tofu when you can have turkey. And sometimes herbivores despise carnivores, wondering why you'd fill your arteries with anything other than the right FDA allotment of vitamins and minerals.

But, as a Christian, it doesn't ultimately matter whether you're a carnivore or an herbivore. What does matter, however—and it matters a whole lot—is whether you're a verbivore, a word-eater; one who literally devours (*vorare*) God's words (*verbum*), in particular, the promises of God in the pages of Scripture.

Abraham Is a Verbivore

Abraham is a verbivore. He is a certified word and promise-eater. In fact, it's only by feeding on God's promises that he was able to, by faith, obey when God called him to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance—a foreign land, a place he'd never been and never seen.

Here, at the beginning of Chapter 12 of Genesis, we find Abraham in Haran. They were on their way to the land of Canaan, but stopped in Haran, perhaps because Abram's father Terah had fallen ill.

Terah then died in that city (cf. 11:32). And we can all imagine how easy it would have been for Abraham to stay put there in Haran, rather than to pack up again and make yet another long trek, this time to the land of Canaan.

But that's why the opening verses of this chapter are so significant. For we see Abraham set out again by faith, a faith that feeds on the promises of God:

Now the Lord said [or, had said] to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (12:1-3).

And notice the result of God feeding Abraham's faith with specific promises: "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him" (12:4).

Nourishing Faith By Feeding It With Promises

You see, if we want to follow in his footsteps, we must be verbivores. And here's why this is such an important point. *Many Christians try to live the Christian life without feeding their Christian faith.* They try to think or act or respond like they know a Christian should, yet find they're unable to time and again. And this is because they're not feeding their faith so that it's strong and able to empower faith-filled living for Jesus.

I remember my brother-in-law once going on a long bike ride that ended badly. He's a strong biker and in very good shape. But even he needs to eat a good meal before he tries to go

on a long ride. On this particular occasion, however, he didn't eat anything. And by the time he'd gotten half-way into the race, he realized he was in big trouble. He's body simply couldn't sustain the demands of the race without some nourishment in his stomach. It didn't end well for him. In fact, he wound up at the hospital.

Far too many Christians try to run the race of faith without nourishing their souls on God's word. And it simply doesn't work. You may be able to go a certain distance, depending upon the strength of your faith at that time. But you can't sustain it over the long-haul. You've got to feed yourself spiritually, otherwise your faith will inevitably fail.

But we also need to realize that if we don't feed faith on promises, we starve it. We've all seen the gut-wrenching pictures of malnourished children. Does your faith look like that? Has it been so neglected that, if faith had a body, you could see its rib cage and jawline, with gaunt eyes and pointed elbows?

Faith is a verbivore; it's a promise-eater. And God feeds faith with promises of Scripture. That's the basic *claim* of this sermon.

But the *aim* of the sermon is this: you need to know *how to feed yourself on the promises of Scripture*. There was a man named George Müller, an extraordinarily humble man who was used mightily by God for the good of others. He was a man of faith. But, as his biographer tells us, he understood faith is a verbivore, a promise eater, and he'd thus learned how to feed his faith:

The thoughtful reader must see in all this a man of weak faith, feeding and nourishing his trust in God that his faith may grow strong. He uses the promise of a prayer-hearing God as a staff to stay his conscious feebleness, that he may lean hard upon the Word which cannot fail.

You and I need to be like that, if we're going to run and not grow weary, if we're going to follow in the footsteps of faith of our father Abraham, and not give up.

But how do we feed the Verbivore called faith?

A Nose for Promises

The first thing you need to do is develop a nose for promises. Most of us have a nose for certain kinds of smells and foods. Our daughter Liza has a nose for popcorn. After we've put the kids to bed, Katie and I will often make popcorn; and we do it the old fashion way, in a pot on the stove, cooked in olive oil. And it doesn't matter how long Liza has been asleep, she somehow always smells the popcorn, and make her way downstairs for a bowl.

Can you smell the promises of Scripture? Do you know what promises smell like?

Promises are God's "I will." "And *I will* make of you a great nation, and *I will* bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2). "Yet once more, in a little while, *I will* shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And *I will* shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and *I will* fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts" (Haggai 2:6-7). "Follow me, and *I will* make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). "To the one who conquers *I will* grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7).

Promises, therefore, always point you forward, to the future. They're rooted in the past, in what God's already done; and they're of course relevant for the present, where you and I live our lives. But promises are always oriented toward the future. They guarantee the coming to pass of something that's not yet happened.

And so promises always point you upward—toward God, who is ultimately the one who making the promises, and responsible to keep them.

Is There a Promise Here?

Second, hunt for the promises. It's not enough simply to know what promises are; if you're going to nourish your faith on them, you must track them down till you find them.

Scripture is, of course, a great garden of promises. Every time you're your way into the garden of Scripture, be on the lookout for promises. Whenever you read Scripture, ask yourself this question: *Is there a promise here I can claim?*

And when you find it, which you inevitably will, focus on it. Center your thoughts on it. Meditate on the words of the promise. Roll them over in your mind, again and again, until they begin to settle into your soul.

If you'd like to try this out, I'd encourage you to go to Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 6; and, in particular, spend a couple weeks meditating on each and every word verses 25 through 34. It's a passage designed to combat a perennial American problem: anxiety. And Jesus does so with promises.

But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matthew 6:30-33).

Translating To Hear Promises

There's a third way in which we feed ourselves on the promises of God, and it's by learning to spot the promises contained in every portion of Scripture. The Bible contains a lot more than promises; there's historical narratives, poetic descriptions, statements of fact, and, of course, commands.

Realize, however, that each and every one of these other aspects of Scripture contains promises in disguise. And as we learn to spot those promises, lying around in perhaps the most unlikely places, we'll find even more to nourish ourselves on.

Take God's commands, for example. Did you know that everyone of God's commands is rooted in one of God's promises? In fact, "God commands what he commands because he promises what he promises."¹ The Bible commands us not to covet what other people have,

¹ Hafemann, *God of Promise*, p. 87.

because God has promised to provide all that we ourselves need. The Bible says we should not seek revenge, because God has promised, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.” And, as we’ve already seen, the Bible commands us not to be anxious, but seek first the kingdom of God, because Jesus promises that “all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33).

To do this well, of course, requires spending time in God’s word. I always found it ironic that someone would come up with the One Minute Devotional Bible. I guess it’s better than nothing. But does anyone only spend one minute a day eating. Absolutely not! Probably more like one to two hours. One minute worth of Bible reading doesn’t sound like a plan for nourishment; it sounds like a diet!

How different is the picture we find in Scripture of those whose lives are full of vitality and vigor! Consider the picture of the individual in Psalm 1, the first of the psalms and the vision for what we are to be like.

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers (1:1-4).

You Can’t Be A Christian Without 3 x 5 Cards

Fourth, stockpile promises for emergency purposes. Not only is it good to search out the promises of Scripture, it’s also important to stockpile them.

Treat promises like the food you need to survive, not only day to day, but during seasons of drought, the times of difficulty in your life. Thus always have promises on hand, ready to turn to and draw from.

Do you realize that in Scripture there are promises that speak specifically to every situation, every circumstance, every stage of life, every issue, every mood? The evangelical bishop J. C. Ryle, I think, got it right: “Few Christians realize the number and length and breadth and depth and height and variety of the precious ‘shalls’ and ‘wills’ laid up in the Bible for the special benefit and encouragement of all who will use them.”²

Scripture is a treasure trove of promises. We should mine it with all our might!

How do you do that? Well, my uncle Steve, a committed Christian, has a good piece of advice. He’s fond of saying, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that you can’t be a Christian without 3 x 5 cards. That’s why he almost always wears button-down shirts with chest pockets, and in his chest pocket he keeps several toothpicks, one or two pens, and a handful of 3 x 5 cards, on which he writes insights and ideas.

² J. C. Ryle also says this concerning the variety and riches of Scripture promises: “The subject is almost inexhaustible. There is hardly a step in man’s life, from a childhood to old age, hardly any position in which man can be placed, for which the Bible has not held out encouragement to everyone who desires to do right in the sight of God.”

Now, you don't need to buy a pocket protector to follow Jesus! But I do think he's on to something important. The 3 x 5 card is a wonderfully simple way to stockpile scriptural promises, so they're close at hand and easily accessible.

But as you stockpile promises, don't simply dump them into one undifferentiated pile. Instead, work to categorize and organize them, according to the need which they address: specifically, the *attitudes of the heart* to which they speak. For this is precisely where the fight of faith takes place: with the attitudes of the heart, the attitudes of unbelief.

Here are some examples: anxiety, lust, pride, vanity, discouragement, fear, anger, doubt, covetousness. Scripture speaks in a thousand wonderful ways to each of these attitudes of the heart, which are really attitudes of unbelief. And the more concretely you can respond to one of these attitudes with a specific and concrete promise, the better nourished your faith will be.

All God's Promises Are Yes In Him

There's a fifth and final way we can feed the verbivore called faith with the promises of God, and that's by worshiping Jesus Christ, the one who's both purchased and guarantees every single one of God's promises.

As we fix our eyes on Jesus, we feed our faith. For we realize that every good thing God plans, for the world and for your life, comes about only in and through Jesus Christ, and because of his death and resurrection. "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor. 1:20). And so Paul goes on to add: "That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory" (2 Cor. 1:20). That is why, every time you pray, you ought to pray, "in Jesus name, Amen." Because you realize that every good thing God does for you, he does only in and through and because of Jesus.

Inevitably in this life, we will find ourselves in some tough situations, ones that are very trying to our faith. When you're there, at a low point, the Bible calls you to "look to Jesus," because he is "the founder and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2).

And if your faith begins to waver concerning the promises of God, then steady yourself at the feet of Jesus, remembering the glorious logic of Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"

How, then, do you steady and strengthen, or nourish and feed, your faith? At the feet of Jesus, in humble adoration and worship. Or in the words of Hudson Taylor: "Only by thinking of all that Jesus is and all he is for us, his life, his death, his work, he himself as revealed to us in the Word, to be the subject of our constant thoughts. Not a striving to have faith . . . but a looking off to the Faithful One seems all we need; a resting in the Loved One entirely, from time and for eternity."

Conclusion

Faith is a verbivore. And if carnivores are those who eat meat, and herbivores are those who eat plants, then verbivores are those who eat *words*; the promises of God, in particular.

Lay hold of the promises of Scripture, and lean hard into them, for they cannot and indeed will not fail you. And as you do so, you will see your faith strengthened, and your joy increased, and your love abounding—all to the glory of God.

This is the key to following in the footsteps of faith of our father Abraham.

And, as we shall see in the weeks ahead, this is the key to Abraham's *continuing* in faith. He kept coming back, again and again, to the promises of God, and the truth that God will be faithful to do what he's said he will do. Or, as Paul says of Abraham in Romans: "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (4:20-21).

Amen.

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