

The faithful of old— studied by the young

Abraham: the father of the faithful

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ABRAM, OR ABRAHAM after his name was changed, originated from the 'cradle of civilisation', where the first cities were developed after the Flood. Scripture records him taking Sarai, later called Sarah, his half-sister, to wife (Gen. 11:27-32). We know very little about Abraham during his early years, only that he was born in Ur of the Chaldees and that his father was Terah. The account of his life occupies some fourteen chapters in Genesis (12–25), and his name appears in twenty-seven books of the Bible.¹ What is more, through the faith and works of this man, Almighty God was going to establish an everlasting covenant that would change the

whole world! Indeed, knowledge of Abraham is critical to understanding the gospel message.

Abraham's choice

God had chosen Abraham to become an integral part in His purpose. We are informed that he commanded Abraham, "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: and I will . . . make thy name great: and thou shalt be a blessing . . . and in thee shall all families of the

1. Including John 8, Romans 4, Galatians 3, Hebrews 7 and 11 and James 2.



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Pictures: Mark Pennington

earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:1-3). Abraham had a big decision to make: would he choose to follow God or enjoy the idols in Mesopotamia? Significantly, we are told that the family of Terah "served other gods" (Josh. 24:2), and this comment (probably) does not exclude Abraham originally, either. This may be suggesting that Abraham, too, may have been influenced by idolatry (such as the cunningly devised Babylonian creation myth, *Enûma Elis*).

Abraham's obedience recorded in Genesis 12 reflects a process that God had set out for him: to leave his country (Ur), to leave his family (Terah at Haran), and to leave his father's house (Lot in Canaan). Terah may have delayed Abraham's final decision to obey God as he led his family to Haran. But once his father was dead Abraham moved to Canaan (see Acts 7:4). It is important to make the point that the Lord does *not* in any way condemn Abraham for any previous actions. We are just told, "Abram departed, as the LORD had spoken unto him" (Gen. 12:4).

So we see that Abraham was obedient to God's instruction. He made the decision to commit his life totally to God. Let us now bring the exhortation to ourselves. We all have the choice to follow God. It is our choice. If we decide to commit ourselves to Him, we begin our journey to the Promised Land, and have the opportunity of developing an everlasting friendship with Him. However, we must be obedient, and learn to trust in God. We must allow Him to lead us by the hand, every step of the way, by faith and not by sight.

Going down to Egypt

As is typical of everyday human life, problems are encountered by Abraham. Famine struck the Promised Land, and Abraham was not going to be spared this. This is an important lesson for us to take note of, for "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). However, during this difficult time Abraham, surprisingly, does *not* call upon the Lord for guidance. Because "the famine was grievous in the land", Abraham and his family "went down into Egypt to sojourn there" (Gen. 12:10). Choosing to go to Egypt may have been the easiest option from a human perspective, but it was (probably) not the best decision from God's. This decision was going to create trouble for Abraham, and he was going to learn many lessons from it.

When in Egypt, Abraham sought to protect himself from the princes of Pharaoh, and actually ended up needing the Lord's assistance to

save him. His time in Egypt was not one to be remembered, for it spoke of hardship and fearing for his life. A weakness in Abraham's character was revealed; he feared man.² He had to learn that "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7). We, like Abraham, may reflect on times like this in our lives when we have sought the easier road from a worldly perspective, yet being 'in Egypt' has not done our life any good at all. Especially at a time like this—in the midst of a global credit crunch—we may be concerned for our families due to economic circumstances, but let us seek to call upon the Name of the Lord, so we are not overcome with fear. Abraham soon realised this and went straight back to God, "to Beth-el . . . [where] Abram called on the name of the LORD" (Gen. 13:3,4). Abraham was a man who learnt from his mistakes. Let us be like him.

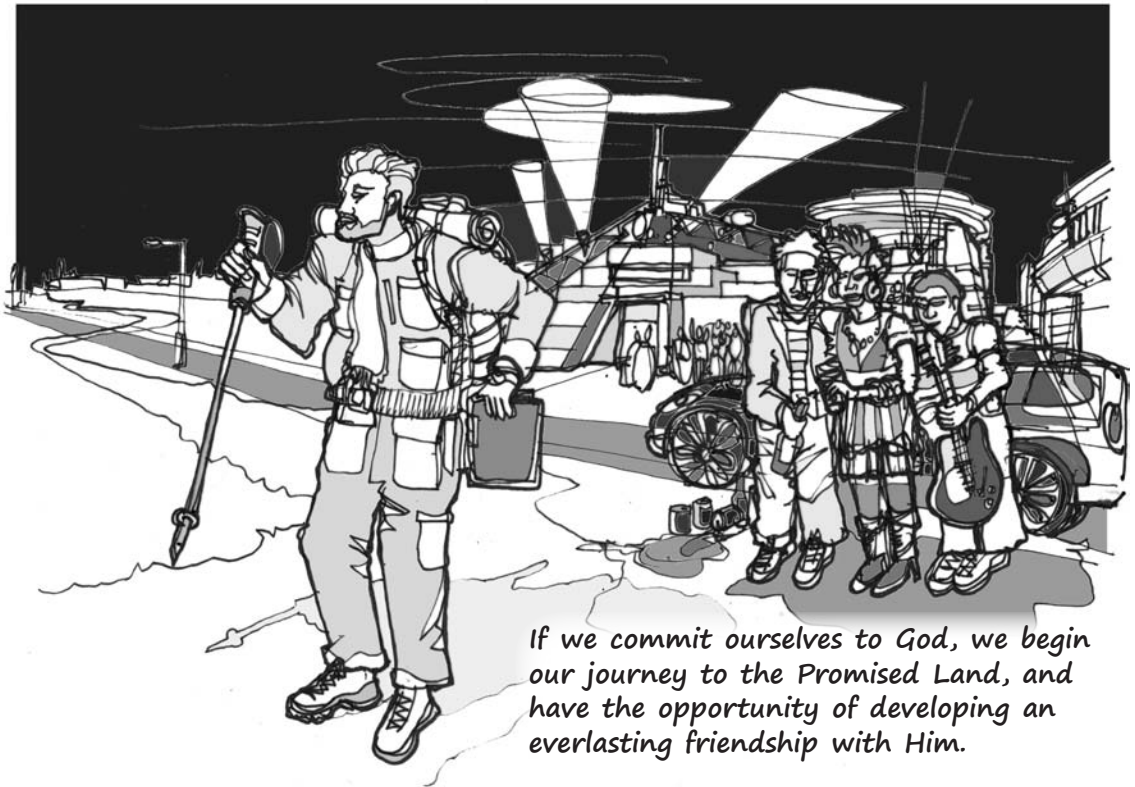
Abraham rescues Lot

Abraham was also a man of action. For instance, when he found out that Lot had been taken by Chedorlaomer and the Mesopotamian kings, he sought to rescue him. Abraham made a confederacy with the Amorites Mamre, Eshcol and Aner (Gen. 14:13), armed his trained servants—318 men born in his own house—and pursued the invaders to Dan. Those armies were defeated by Abraham, and all the people and goods were redeemed.

After the enemy had been defeated, Melchizedek, king of Salem, enters the Scriptural record with bread and wine, which pointed forward to the Last Supper and was surely an occasion when Abraham "rejoiced to see [Jesus'] day" (Jno. 8:56). Melchizedek was also "the priest of the most high God" (Gen. 14:18), and this king-priest brought much more than a fellowship meal to Abraham, he carried a blessing from God. Abraham reacted in subjection to this great man and gave him a tithe of all the spoils (Heb. 7:4).

We find that Abraham had to help Lot again, this time to plead with God for his rescue from Sodom (Gen. 18:23-32). Evidently Abraham did not think of his own life, but of the wellbeing of others, living as a follower of Jesus should: "Look not every man on his own things, but . . . on the things of others" (Phil. 2:4). Abraham administered righteousness and judgement in saving Lot. He also commanded his children and his household after him "to do justice and

2. This reoccurs when Abraham is in Gerar with Abimelech (Gen. 20); both times Abraham pretends that Sarah is only his sister.



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judgment" (Gen. 18:19), that the Lord might fulfil the promises.

Belief in God

After the outward demonstration of extraordinary faith as recorded in Genesis 14, including not seeking to be made rich by man in the person of the king of Sodom (vv. 21-24), God appeared to Abraham again and said, "Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward" (15:1). The Lord gave Abraham His full assurance that the path he had taken was secure and Divinely protected. It is no surprise that Abraham had begun thinking about an heir, seeing he had no child at that time. He suggested that Eliezer of Damascus, steward of his house, be heir to the promises; but the Lord said, "This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir" (v. 4).

Abraham had to develop patience and wait for the "set time" that God had appointed for Sarah to bear a child: "My covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this *set time* in the next year" (17:21; cf. 21:1). Patience is a quality that is notable for being required of a disciple of the Lord. Jesus will return at the "set time" that God has appointed. But will his fol-

lowers be waiting patiently and faithfully? As the hymn says, "We make the answer now".

Returning to Genesis 15, humanly speaking Sarah would have been past child-bearing age when God made the promise recorded in verse 4, but Abraham had confidence in God. He had come a long way from Ur, and the Lord was his shield. If God could secure victory in battle, He would certainly ensure that Abraham had not only a child but a great multitude of descendants: "For with God nothing shall be impossible" (Lk. 1:37). But would his seed really become innumerable? Abraham was instructed by God to lift up his eyes to view the heavens (a spectacular sight in those days with no light pollution!). And Abraham believed, and his trust in the Almighty was counted to him as righteousness: "Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and He said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And *he believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness*" (Gen. 15:5,6; cf. Rom. 4:3,20-22; Gal. 3:6).

Abraham offers his only begotten son

Later, the Lord "tested" Abraham (Gen. 22:1, ESV) to assess whether he would show complete obedience. Abraham was asked to take his only

son Isaac into the land of Moriah and to offer him there for a burnt offering. What must have been going through Abraham's mind at this stage? Surely all God had promised him centred on Isaac. Had the Lord changed His mind? God had clearly told Abraham, "My covenant will I establish with Isaac" (17:21).

Abraham's immediate obedience at this stage is remarkable, as he does not question the Lord. Not once. He simply "rose up early in the morning . . . took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering . . . and went unto the place of which God had told him" (22:3). The three-day journey that ensued was a time of great reflection. He had moved into a strange land, offered unto the Lord sacrifices, and carried out the covenant of circumcision. Yet was God forsaking him now, after all this?

Isaac was obviously inquisitive about what was going to be used for the offering, but Abraham responded, "My son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son . . . And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son" (vv. 8-10). Abraham was willing to obey God's command, even if it meant losing his son. But the angel of the Lord intervened and Abraham was told to lift up his eyes to see the substitute ram caught in the thicket. Abraham took the ram and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of Isaac. We see, then, that Abraham feared God, and stood firm through this test of obedience. Indeed, Abraham did not withhold his only begotten son from God.

We are informed that Abraham truly believed that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11:19). It was a difficult trial of faith, but he held onto his belief in the resurrection, and this helped him through the trial. This belief is a foundation to our faith too: that the Lord God raised His only begotten Son from the dead after three days, and that we, like him, will be raised and given eternal life if we too have the faith of Abraham.

A further point to observe is that Abraham was commanded by God to 'lift up his eyes' on a number of occasions throughout his life: firstly to behold the land that had been promised to him following Lot's departure; secondly when viewing the stars in heaven; and thirdly to see the ram caught in the thicket. God was telling him to look

up and appreciate that these blessings all came from heaven. We should do the same.

Belief and obedience

The life of Abraham illustrates how God is busy at work developing our faith, moulding and shaping our characters so that we are fit for the Kingdom of God. Abraham became a traveller and a sojourner in the Land of Promise. He did not seek for any worldly possessions. He looked up to heaven rather than down to the earth. His great hope lay in the promises that shaped his life, for he sought "a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10). Though the ancient cities are now lying under rubble, the future city will be eternal, never to be destroyed.

We have also seen that God was longsuffering with Abraham when he had lapses in faith (as we all do). Though he is described as a father to a godly generation, even he needed to learn like a child. It is evident that God was continually training him during the circumstances of his life to become more faithful and trusting in Him. This development was not a smooth transition, there were setbacks along the way; however, he learned from his mistakes and God showed him mercy. Abraham's *belief* in God and his subsequent *obedience* (the faith and works spoken of in James 2:22) were hallmarks of his extraordinary life. Particularly, these were clearly seen:

- when migrating to Canaan (Heb. 11:8)
- in keeping the covenant of circumcision
- supremely in offering his only son, Isaac.

Because of this man's faith, the promises to Abraham are now relayed to us, today, for "in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed My voice" (Gen. 22:18). We too can be counted as Abraham's multitudinous seed through baptism into Christ, becoming heirs according to the promise (Rom. 9:8; Gal. 3:29). How wonderful!

As we know, Abraham still has not received the promises. He is sleeping in the dust of the earth, waiting for the time which the Lord has appointed. Abraham's belief in God is not just written for his sake, but that *we too* might be fully persuaded of the Lord God, Who "raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:24,25). Let us therefore rejoice to see Abraham's day, 'lift up our eyes' and realise the great spiritual blessings we have received in Christ Jesus, "for [our] redemption draweth nigh" (Lk. 21:28).