

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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SUMMARY OF ABRAHAM

Abraham's name is mentioned 246 times in the entire Bible; 70 times in the New Testament.¹

You would think, therefore, that since Abraham is such a constant theme even in the New Testament, modern preachers would at least mention his name once in a while. Since they don't, we must assume that they are missing something vital in their picture of the Gospel of Christ. The Apostles and Prophets all went back to Abraham for their message.

A new Family

The first eleven chapters of Genesis are a general description of what God wanted this world to be like, and of what it definitely isn't now. Man was made "in God's image," but ever since the time of Adam and Eve, people haven't lived up to God's expectations at all. In fact, we are so far off course, we are so remotely out of step with God's plans, that our present status is more like a criminal on the run – hiding, stealing, murdering, lying and cheating, feeding on lusts and abominations. We are not, by any stretch of the imagination, pleasing to the God who made us. And he has reacted in kind – he doesn't like us either. He has proved to us many times in history that he intends to destroy us – like the Flood in Noah's day.

Except for one Family. God chose Abraham and his descendants to form a new Family that would live up to his expectations. While the rest of the world was destroying itself, Abraham's Family was led to a new home, given promises of a new life, lived in communion with God, and experienced deliverances and blessings from Heaven. Everyone outside the Family had nothing but punishment and death before them; everyone inside the Family was destined for life. Not that the Family was perfect either; they had the same sins, the same shortcomings, the same ignorance of God and his spiritual world that the pagans had. But God lifted them up out of their darkness and brought them into the Light so that they could see him and his Inheritance. It was in spite of their sins that he blessed them.

Through Abraham the precedent was set for the rest of the Family that would include the Nation of Israel and the Church of Christ. All who are related to Abraham – who have his faith, who are sinners brought out of darkness and death, who have seen the living God and received from his own hand the Promises – will one day "come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matthew 8:11)

The point is that if you're one of Abraham's Family, you receive everything; if you're not in his Family, you get nothing. God was laying the groundwork for the entire Family of Abraham to inherit the culmination of the Covenant Promises.

¹ English Standard Version.

The Heir of God – the Son of God

We mustn't miss something even more significant in Abraham's experience. Again, we have to go back to the contrast between the Creation model and the "Fall" of mankind from that high place. Since man was made "in God's image," that means man was God's son on earth. It's the *relationship* between them that is the key here. The Father and Son work together, they share their riches, they understand and love each other deeply. Nobody else has this privilege of relationship that exists between the two. That's what Adam and Eve lost when they walked away from God in rebellion against him.

And *that's* what Abraham gained by his faith. That special relationship between God and man was restored in his life. As Jesus explained it later to his disciples, "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." (John 15:15) In this passage, the Son is declaring his disciples to be sons of God also – with all the privileges and responsibilities that go along with that relationship. Hebrews 2:10-18 also expands on this idea.

The difference between this new status and the original Creation relationship is that man is being lifted up to the eternal Son's level – he's the Heir who inherits the fullness of the glory of God, and experiences the depths of the Father himself. While God led Abraham throughout the land of Canaan, he kept making promises to the Patriarch that were never fulfilled in his own lifetime. And yet God meant every word he said. Abraham himself actually inherited very little of the Promises, only a foretaste of them. But he was enabled to see through faith that these Promises were spiritual in nature, they were in another world (not this one), that they were eternal and changeless. He saw the Christ. (John 8:56) And he saw that his Family would inherit the same status – spiritual sons and daughters, raised from the dust of this world into new spiritual lives, able to live in the presence of God in his world.

As Christians we were all taught that God is a Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit. And the Son is the Heir of his Father; he inherits the fullness of God. What Abraham learned is that God intended this same status *for a man* – starting with himself. That's the startling thing about the story. In Abraham we see the Son of God on earth, a man and yet the Heir of God. Of course we know that Abraham himself was not the incarnate Word of God. But the story of Abraham introduces us to the idea of a man being in a close, Father/Son relationship with God – the one that Jesus has. Would God ever bring man into his own House to live with him forever, enjoying the riches of the Treasures of Heaven? Yes – we see God's intentions to do exactly that in the story of Abraham. And as the story progresses through the rest of the Bible, we learn that Abraham inherited the identical status, the identical Treasures, that the second Person of the Trinity has. Jesus came to earth and testified to that.

The Covenant Promises

The story of God dealing with Abraham extends from Genesis 12 to Genesis 25; but we can collate all the elements of the Covenant story into four promises.

- **A Son (Genesis 15:4)** – When God first called Abraham and told him to move from his native Ur in Chaldee to Canaan, the man was already 75 years old. He and his wife Sarah had no children. Since Abraham was prosperous – he had extensive holdings in the form of livestock – he was concerned that his chief servant would have to become his heir.

But that was not to be. The LORD promised Abraham that he would give him a natural-born son through his wife Sarah. This was no small matter, because it would involve a miracle to change Sarah from barren to pregnant. And that’s exactly what God did (in due time, after a lapse of faith on Abraham’s part when he had Ishmael by Sarah’s handmaid Hagar). The “miracle baby” was named Isaac, and he became the legal heir of Abraham’s estate.

- **The Land (Genesis 15:7)** – When Abraham arrived in Canaan, he was a wanderer and an alien and couldn’t just pick a place and settle down; the locals wouldn’t let him do that. God promised him, however, that this entire area of Palestine would someday belong to his descendants – a promise that no doubt caused even greater tension between him and the Canaanites. Again this required the hand of God; the Canaanites weren’t going to give up their property to an alien without a fight.

So instead of fighting them, Abraham stayed on the move, wandering around Canaan and going down to Egypt. But he received a “first taste” of the promise that the entire land would eventually belong to him and his family. When Sarah died, he had no place of his own to bury her. So he approached the Hittites and contracted to buy the cave and field of Machpelah to bury her. That burial site stayed in the family for the next 500-plus years until the Israelites came back from Egypt and claimed the rest of the Promised Land. The deed was an initial payment of the promise that the LORD gave Abraham.

- **A Nation (Genesis 12:2)** – Most everyone needs a family, and some want large families. But God promised Abraham something extraordinary: he intended to turn Abraham’s descendants into a nation. In those days when one’s survival was almost always threatened by disease, plagues, drought, roving marauders and raiding bandits, this again would require a miracle to accomplish. Single couples simply don’t turn into nations over time.

There was a problem right away, however. Building a family involves getting a wife for his son. But Abraham had no intention of letting his son Isaac marry one of the local Canaanite girls – they would surely lead him into idolatry. So he decided to find a wife for his son from his family back home. He sent his servant back to Haran to visit the family and see if he could talk one of the girls into coming to Canaan and marrying Isaac. The servant, being a realist, knew that no decent girl would willingly leave home and family (and never see them again!), travel hundreds of miles to a strange land, and marry someone she had never seen. So he put the matter

in God's hands. God led him to exactly the right girl, she agreed to go (a miracle in itself!), and Isaac received his wife. The Family was started.

- **The Blessing (Genesis 12:3)** – At one point God decided to test Abraham's faith. This is significant, because true faith is not simply a vague hope that things will turn out well in the end; it's an *assurance*, a *certainty* (as Hebrews 11 tells us) based on what we see in God's spiritual world. Since God was teaching Abraham what true faith is, one would expect to see a test as part of the training process; we are not allowed a false faith – there's too much at stake here. (God always tests the genuineness of faith – see 1 Peter 1:6-7.)

So God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. On the surface this just flies in the face of every promise that he had made to Abraham; losing his son meant losing the whole Covenant. But because he had true faith, he willingly laid Isaac on the altar and prepared to cut his throat. At that point the LORD intervened and provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac's life.

There is no need to conjecture about what was going through Abraham's mind at this point – the New Testament tells us. "He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead." (Hebrews 11:19) In other words, he could see the deeper spiritual principles of redemption, sacrifice and resurrection overturning the curse of death.

What God was doing with Abraham in these initial fulfillments was giving him physical answers to immediate problems. But the Project that God started here with Abraham was much larger than his personal situation. God was laying the groundwork for the entire Family of Abraham to inherit a more powerful version of the Covenant Promises.

- The promise of the **Son** would insure that there would always be an Heir through whom the rest of the Family of Abraham would receive the Covenant blessings.
- The promise of the **Land** gave Abraham's extended Family a secure home of their own, political stability, prosperity, and the Kingdom which would secure the Covenant blessings.
- The promise of the **Nation** created the Chosen People, the Family who shared the rights and privileges of being Abraham's heirs. It provided the genealogical guidelines that would guarantee Covenant blessings to the Family members only.
- The promise of the **Blessing** opened the door to God's House to overturn the great curse of mankind – death – and give God's people open access to the throne of God himself, and experience true life in God.

What God gave Abraham was in reality the same things that Adam and Eve had been given – the Inheritance of the Son. Remember that God took away these things in punishment when they rebelled against him.

- Adam lost his right as God’s heir, thereby giving up the treasures and resources of Heaven while living in this world – something that he could ill afford to do without.
- God cursed the land because of their sin.
- They were no longer part of God’s family – they were criminals instead of sons and daughters in his image; he was no longer going to treat them or their children as a Father.
- God cursed them to death, and took away their access to the Tree of Life

But now that God was putting together a new Family along spiritual lines, he made sure his new Heir would inherit the Treasures meant for the Son. That’s what these Covenant Promises focused on.

Given only to the Heirs

God made no apologies to the human race for reserving his Treasures for Abraham and his Family. We’re going to have to get used to this as we read the Bible – both Old and New Testaments. He really doesn’t like us. He owes us nothing. It’s due to his mercy toward his enemies that he lets us live, and gives us the blessings of ordinary life to survive. At times he showed us how little he owes us when he “pulled the plug” and gave people what they really deserved – like during the Flood, and the destruction of Sodom. The only grace he shows to the ordinary sinner is found in Creation itself. Paul describes this:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Romans 1:19-20)

This is all that they will get from him. Evidently it’s enough to educate them about who he is, and convict them of their sin, and alarm them to “seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.” (Acts 17:27)

But to Abraham and his Family, God is going to reveal his entire Plan. They will see him in his glory; they will be transformed from sinners to saints; they will walk with him, live with him, experience his fullness. He will be their Father, they will be his Son.

We understand this concept in our own lives. We may show some interest in the neighbor’s children, and we may even like them. But when it comes to a father’s love, that’s reserved for our own children alone. We don’t give the family inheritance to strangers. We don’t pour out our lives for them. We reserve our time, resources, and our very hearts for our own children.

That’s why God spent all his time training, rebuking, correcting and teaching the Israelites in the Old Testament – not the pagans. That’s why God set up his Kingdom in Canaan, and created the capital in Jerusalem – not in other places in the world. That’s why he put his Temple in the midst of the descendants of Abraham – to bless *them* with

his presence. It was never a worldwide expansion effort, or what we call today “world evangelism” through sending out missionaries all over the earth. All of this was reserved for one special people, at one special place on earth. If anybody else was interested, they had to go *there* to see it.

And even among the Israelites it was a constant responsibility on their part to remain in the Family, and keep strict genealogical records to prove their birthright. If, for example, a priest couldn’t prove his family’s ancestry back to Abraham, he wasn’t allowed to minister in the Temple. And if a family didn’t have the necessary records to prove their ancestry, they weren’t allowed to own land in Canaan. All these privileges were reserved for only those who could prove their descent from Abraham.

We are all going to find out that reality on Judgment Day. Paul says clearly that “if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Galatians 3:29) Being made one with Christ connects us back to Abraham himself, which means that we also will receive the Promises. But someone who doesn’t have that connection, who doesn’t have Abraham’s faith (“those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” – Galatians 3:9), will get nothing.

In Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:14)

There’s been an unfortunate and unnecessary confusion concerning the Inheritance. According to modern students of the Bible, only in the New Testament do we finally get a clear view of what God has for us in Christ. Only in the ministry of the Church do people receive the blessings of God in Christ. But that’s backwards. We can clear up this confusion simply by taking the case to court. If this is an Inheritance, then there is real property and privilege involved, and the owner of that property has decided whom to give it to. If we want this property then we have to prove our line of descent from the owner. Even if we don’t understand this, the judge would proceed in the case assuming that Abraham was the possessor of the property in question and we have to prove our claim to it.

Think about this: what we want in Christ, what we want in the Gospel, *was given first to Abraham*. He owned it, and now he passes it on to us his descendants. If we believe modern scholarship that there was little to nothing of content to the Inheritance that Abraham knew about or owned, then we wouldn’t be inheriting anything from him – instead, he’d be showing up at *our* door to claim his inheritance from us New Testament Christians! But the Bible never puts it in that order – it’s always the other way around. That means that Abraham knew exactly what the Gospel was, and we must sit at his feet and learn from him what the terms are.

You see, Old and New Testament alike stress the point that you must be a descendent of Abraham to get the Promises made to Abraham. Christianity is all about that.

Don’t touch my Prophet!

It never ceases to amaze me how modern Bible teachers treat Abraham with contempt.

A friend of mine told me that he recently heard a sermon by a pastor in NYC. In it he was preaching against Abraham's "sins," as usual, telling his congregation that they need to do what Abraham didn't do. Then he said (trying to show that his faith in God was far stronger than the Patriarch's), "I'm more righteous than Abraham was!" I couldn't believe that the man said that in public. I know lots of people think that way, but it was the height of arrogance to proclaim that from the pulpit – and criminal to lead the flock of Jesus Christ with such arrogance.²

What will happen to these modern critics who malign Abraham's character? The LORD still lives; so does Abraham (Matthew 22:32). The two of them are watching the Church right now and getting ready for the feast at the end of time when the whole Family gathers together in God's House.

Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven ... (Matthew 8:10-11)

And evidently there are many people who would be ashamed to be around Abraham, and as a result the LORD just may be striking their names off the invitation list. They will pound on the door to get in, claiming to be Christians, and the LORD will tell them, "You despise my friend and Heir! The Patriarch of the Family! You've disowned your heritage! Why should I let you in?"

What God was doing in and through Abraham was so critical that he added a blessing and a curse concerning how people treated his Heir.

I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse.
(Genesis 12:3)

In other words, God wasn't just talking about a casual attitude toward Abraham as a person, as if talking bad about someone is never nice – we wouldn't want people to talk bad about us either. It's much more than that. Imagine the reception that people will have when they arrive before God on Judgment Day and he reveals the curses, rejections, willful ignorance, persecutions, hatred and condemnations they showed toward the Heir of God! Saying disparaging remarks about an ordinary person is unkind; saying them about the Heir of God and the doorway to the Life and Light of the world is spiritual suicide. It shows an abysmal ignorance of God and his appointed Servant.

God gave Abraham the Key to life with God – the Gospel of Christ. He led Abraham step by step through the Promises, taught him everything he needed to know, showed him the long-range plans of the Kingdom and the Nation of Israel as well as the Church of Christ. As Abraham came to the end of his life, he realized that he had in his hands the entire Plan of Salvation and glorification of the Son of God. He himself had experienced it in part.

Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad. (John 8:56)

² He also seemingly missed the critical fact that righteousness comes by faith, not by our works!

So when people accuse Abraham of ignorance, of getting his religion from pagans and their worship of demons, and being in the dark about the true God, they are insulting him and his God. And when people accuse him of a lack of faith as he followed God through his trials in Canaan and Egypt, they show their own profound ignorance of the ways of the LORD, and again insult the Patriarch who learned and showed the rest of us what true faith is. And when they contradict the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets who proclaim Abraham as our Father in the Faith, and the one from whom we must trace our spiritual descent, they are deliberately steering us away from the Way that God has chosen for his people, and they are despising the authority of the Apostles and Prophets. While the entire Bible has nothing but praise for Abraham and counsels us to go to him to learn about our God, modern scholars and students in contrast have almost nothing good to say about him.

That will get them nowhere with the God of Abraham. This issue is so serious, it's so important that we get this right, that God pronounced a curse and a blessing concerning Abraham.

*Whoever gets their faith from Abraham will be blessed along with Abraham;
whoever despises Abraham in any way will be shut out of the Family and
receive nothing good from God – only curses.*

Essentially God started a “hit list” of people he intends to target with a curse. According to Genesis 12:3, anybody who bad-mouths Abraham is going to the top of God's hit list. Seeing that God is the perfect Judge, and he never asks for anybody's opinion or for wisdom when discerning someone's heart, I would think it would be a dangerous game to play with God in this matter. One careless remark, a single incident of lack of respect, a show of arrogance instead of fear, and someone could quickly find themselves on the outside facing the wrath of God.

... While the sons of the Kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 8:12)

It's a tragedy that some people are going to learn this lesson the hard way.

When they were few in number,
of little account, and sojourners in it,
wandering from nation to nation,
from one kingdom to another people,
he allowed no one to oppress them;
he rebuked kings on their account,
saying, “Touch not my anointed ones,
do my Prophets no harm!” (Psalms 105:12-15)

Anybody who touches the Patriarch with disrespect – who belittles him, who despises him, who condemns him and relegates him to the dustbin of the ignorant masses of humanity – will experience the wrath of the Father in Heaven, who jealously guards the safety and reputation of his Chosen People. He wants the Way to Life open and clearly

understood, not obscured and polluted with modern disdain and contempt for the Patriarchs. Abraham has a powerful Friend.

Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of *Abraham your friend?* (2 Chronicles 20:7)

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of *Abraham, my friend;* you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, “You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”; fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:8-10)

Was not Abraham our Father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “*Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness*”—and *he was called a friend of God.* (James 2:21-23)

In other words, what you think about Abraham (and the other Patriarchs as well) will affect your eternal destiny.

Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness,
you who seek the LORD:
look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
that I might bless him and multiply him.
(Isaiah 51:1-2)

Faith sees God's world

Paul tells us in Galatians that *God gave the Gospel to Abraham* when he made this Covenant with him.

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the Gospel beforehand to Abraham. (Galatians 3:8)

We all know what Paul meant by the Gospel; so this is a particularly strong statement to make about the content of an Old Testament story.³ But this alerts us to the fact that, not only was there more going on in this story than we would otherwise pick up on, but also that God told Abraham the root idea of the Gospel of Christ. This is significant because this event took place at the beginning of the Hebrew race, the nation of Israel, and defines the history of God's people as they were set apart and led in a path different from the rest of the world. It's the Gospel, according to Paul, that made them different.

Another New Testament passage alerts us to a second reality going on in Abraham's story.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. (Hebrews 11:8)

We must realize that faith opened up an insight into God's spiritual world that Abraham would not have otherwise had. He saw something that was real. It wasn't a general feeling such as "I'm not sure what's going on, but I hope this turns out all right." It was a spiritual perception of something specific. Hebrews gets very specific about what Abraham saw.

For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:10)

Now this is plain English; there is only one way to understand this verse and be fair to the text. Faith gave him the spiritual ability to see a spiritual reality behind the physical promises. What exactly he saw isn't for us to say; he was the eyewitness. But that means that Abraham was not so naïve as to think that the modest fulfillment he himself received of these promises was the last word on the subject.⁴ He could see what was coming thousands of years later; we know that from the statement in Hebrews. So the fact that Abraham had a supernatural faith now opens up the possibility of him knowing the Gospel that we know about – as Paul claims. Anything short of this is cheating Abraham and his descendants out of the Covenant, and treating them like children compared with us. Our only "claim to fame" here is that we live after the event of Jesus, and have had the whole thing explained to us in the Bible; faith, on the other hand, did the same thing for saints who lived before Jesus.

Paul talks about Abraham's faith in his letter to the Romans.

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered⁵ in this matter? (Romans 4:1; *NIV*)

³ There are some who would claim that the next phrase – "the Gospel, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed'" – was all that God told Abraham about the Gospel. A careful analysis of what God did for the Patriarchs will dispel that error.

⁴ Abraham was a stranger in the land that God was giving him, and conditions there were far from a blessing for him. Witness the necessity of his trip to Egypt at one point to escape famine – Genesis 12:10.

⁵ I prefer the NIV's rendering of this verse, because the original word here - εὕρισκω - means primarily "to find, discover, encounter." That fits better with the training that Abraham went through in his walk of faith.

In fact, the subject of faith is first explained to us in the story of Abraham. Faith is not what most people think it is – simply a trust that things will work out well in the end, or an intellectual belief of some sort about God. The reason this faith of Abraham is unique is that true faith, as God requires, has attached to it the concept of *righteousness*.

God promised Abraham some amazing things that would not have occurred without the hand of God, and Abraham (the story tells us) believed God would do them.

And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed⁶ the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:5-6)

The concept of “righteousness” (from the Hebrew word צדק, *tsadak*) means “to be right, just, normal.” In God’s eyes, in other words, here is a man who meets all the necessary standards; there is nothing wrong in him, there is no reason to be alienated from him. So God gives full access to the throne of God. There are only two ways a person can achieve this kind of standing with God. One is clearly stated in Deuteronomy, the Law of God.

And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us. (Deuteronomy 6:25)

If anybody keeps all the Law of God, without exception, as God requires it (it’s more complex than we can possibly imagine!) then he will be righteous in God’s eyes. It’s very simple to determine whether someone is righteous in this way: God puts their entire lives, their thoughts, their hearts up against the full Law and sees if there’s any deviation between the two. If only one law has been broken, the person is not a righteous man (see James 2:10-11).

The other route to righteousness is through the kind of faith that Abraham learned, as this passage in Genesis 15 shows us. Consider this: the Law describes the perfect Son, the Son who is pleasing to his Father. He alone is righteous. Now if God comes to Abraham and offers him the life of the Son, in all its fullness, as a free gift – and Abraham sees that and responds by wanting that and walking in that Life as God’s Son – then he is now in fact God’s Son and God sees him as righteous also. Never mind the fact that he’s still a sinner and falls far short of the glory of God; when God gives the gift of this relationship, the thing is done legally. The reality will be straightened out in another way (i.e., the perfect life of the Son of God in the flesh, and his death atoning for Abraham’s sins).

So Abraham’s simple faith in God’s promises earned him the status of being counted a righteous Son in God’s eyes.

⁶ The Hebrew word for “believe” is אמן (*aman*), which is the basis for our word “Amen.” One form of the verb can be used of someone who is “reliable, faithful, steady.” Here in Abraham’s case, he was “convinced” that God was reliable and faithful in what he said, and he “trusted” in God’s Word to him. Or we could say that he was an eyewitness of the glory of God and testified to its reality.

Paul makes a point of this transaction in his letter to the Romans. He sees the two ways to righteousness also, and the fact that Abraham took the first way shows that it has priority over the second way. Anybody who has the faith of Abraham will be seen as a righteous Son in God's eyes.

For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. ... The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Romans 4:9-12)

Most people believe in a god of some sort, and in spiritual realities – even if it's simply to vehemently deny it out of a guilty conscience. So we have to focus on the particular kind of faith that Abraham had that distinguishes his faith from other kinds. Abraham learned the process as he followed God in Canaan.

- **First, faith is based on God's direct Word.** “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.’” (Genesis 12:1) Up to this point Abraham had believed in the gods that his culture taught him; but this was a word from the true God, from outside of the world, apart from man's philosophies and imaginations. What most men dream of, what some men claim falsely, actually happened to Abraham – he met the living God and spoke with him.

This is critical for what is about to happen. We can't participate in the kind of religion that God is calling us to unless we get a clear call from God to follow him. True knowledge of God, and a true understanding of God's will for us, is based not on our own desires or opinions (see what happened in the Garden of Eden when Adam and his wife took that approach) but rather on what God tells us. Truth is what the Logos gives us, not what comes from darkness. Abraham believed what God said to him, and that was the basis of their relationship.

- **Second faith is the revelation of things to come.** God promised things to Abraham that were clearly not part of his retirement plan! At this point Abraham was 75 years old, a wealthy property owner (possibly a land owner as well), and probably beginning to settle down to the idea of spending the rest of his days in Ur. But God called him to a completely new life, in a remote setting hundreds of miles away, with a startling new future as the progenitor of a new nation.

And (as we've seen already) God revealed a new spiritual world to Abraham that expanded the scope of the promises and gave Abraham a sense of the destiny of himself and his Family as it would affect the entire world, all through history. In other words he was lifted up above his local circumstances and enabled to see the world of God and the great affairs of God's Kingdom as God moves and arranges men and nations to do his bidding.

These are the things that drew Abraham to follow God. Just a change in scenery or labors would not have been enough to justify such a change of life, nor form the foundation for this supremely great work in history.

- **Third**, *faith desires what God promises*. Perhaps we overlook this aspect of faith in Abraham's life too easily; remember that he was quite prosperous and probably settled where he was in Ur. What he saw in God's promises, however, captured his heart and drew him to follow God in this new venture. He wanted what God promised.

That desire is what overcomes the hardships that inevitably come up along the way as we follow God through this world. What God has for his people is *remedial*, so we have to see the value in them and be willing to give up what is spiritually killing us – our sin. God's treasures are *eternal* and worth far more than the transitory baubles of this world. God is leading us into a *relationship with him*, not just a Heavenly vacation Paradise where we can enjoy physical pleasures without the pain.

So the hope of better things, Heavenly things, and spiritual treasures strengthened and encouraged Abraham to spend the rest of his life in wandering, alienation and trouble. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, there was a certainty behind what Abraham saw and heard from God, a vision of the reality and excellence of these promises, that motivated him to turn his back on the world and put his hope in them – motivating him to reach beyond the partially-filled promises that he himself received.

- **Fourth**, *faith sees that God must do this thing that is promised*. It's impossible for us to carry it off. All four promises that God made to Abraham weren't things that Abraham could do on his own. Sarah was too old to have a son at her age; the Canaanites weren't going to give up any of their property to a stranger and alien, let alone the entire land. Rebekah could hardly be expected to move hundreds of miles away and marry someone she had never met; and the death sentence on Isaac was certain. In each of these situations Abraham faced the impossibility of the outcome, even though he had God's promise concerning them.

But faith sees the certainty in spite of the impossibility. In fact, true faith reasons that God can do the impossible – he doesn't avoid the failure, he simply goes through the failure to success on the other side. Once again, Paul tells us exactly what was going through Abraham's mind about this.

He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief 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. (Romans 4:19-21)

Hebrews even tells us that Abraham “considered that God was able even to raise [*Isaac*] from the dead.” (Hebrews 11:19) So he believed in a miracle-working God.

- **Fifth, *faith must wait on God.*** At this point Abraham faltered in his faith. After over twenty years of waiting for a son, he finally gave in to his wife’s pressure and had a son by his wife’s handmaid Hagar – a natural birth. (Genesis 16) This mistake had repercussions for the rest of history. But the immediate problem was that it was not the fulfillment of God’s promise. After Ishmael had been born, God told Abraham:

Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my Covenant with him as an everlasting Covenant for his offspring after him. (Genesis 17:19)

Abraham waited for a total of twenty-five years for the fulfillment of this promise – he was an old man of 100 before God finally fulfilled it for him. The point here is significant: if what God promised is impossible, then we have no other option but to wait for it. Any move on our part to shorten the time or find another alternative is not the fulfillment of the promise; and if we wait until the thing is done, that proves that we truly believe that only God can do it for us and that it’s worth the wait.⁷

So Abraham, over the period of his experiences following the LORD, learned the essential elements of true faith in God. Abraham’s faith lifts us up to the status of sons of God, the heirs of God – hence the name “the free gift of righteousness.” (Romans 5:7) These same elements are characteristic of every child of Abraham who has the faith of the Patriarchs.

Not yet

But what exactly was God doing here? He was showing Abraham an essential aspect of all the Promises of the Covenant: *certainty, but not yet*. God guaranteed the Promises of the Inheritance. Abraham could, as the saying goes, take those Promises to the bank. But he would *not* receive them in this world.

That’s actually the problem with all the Promises: God is holding out the treasures of Heaven to his heirs, but they aren’t for this life. This world that we live in now is not what God has in mind for his heirs. On the other hand, the heirs can’t doubt the certainty of what God promised them because they have his deed in their hands, signed by him, to be made good in eternity. In fact, they’ve seen the Promises “from afar.”

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

⁷ This is in fact the importance of learning the Works of the LORD (Psalm 111:2) – we find out what only God can do, and learn the difference between his works and our works, for important reasons. See *The Works of the LORD* (Ravenbrook Publishers: 1997) for an extended discussion on this topic.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. (Hebrews 11:13)

All the Promises from God have this *certainty, but not yet* tension in them. We are forced to fall back on faith, not sight; we hold fast to things we can't see, things we can't prove, things we can't show other people. And the longer we live in this world doing without the things we hold precious, the more people think we're crazy putting our hopes in treasures that aren't real, stories made up by an ancient religion.

But for those who live by faith, they never doubt their Father's intention to bless them with his Treasures from Heaven. They are true children of God following their Father *through* this world into the next world.

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