

Bethel Christian Church
In God Alone

Abraham: Our Father in the faith

The life of Abraham is full of great and dramatic stories. The outstanding stories we will draw from in this study are his calling from idolatry to follow God, the birth of his first son Isaac, and then the occasion in which he offered up his son Isaac. We may remember these events in awe, confusion or with the sentiment. It is possible to read them and be familiar with them without making any helpful connection with our lives. How does God remember them? What does the Scripture say about them? It was in these three events as well as the rest of his life that Abraham became 'The father of all who believe' (Romans 4:11). But we note from Paul's words below that Abraham did not just believe that there is a God, or that God is good, but that God's grace is to justify the ungodly.

And Abraham received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them,

Paul meant that Abraham stood at the head of the long line of humanity who have trusted in the promises of God which in leading to Christ lead sinners to the unthinkable, justification by grace not performance.

Paul used Abraham's trust as the prime illustration how humanity gains his favour and pleases him.

Again we come to the principles of faith revealed in Hebrews eleven, especially in verse six.

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

Abraham's faith must meet these requirements if he is to please God.

Pleasing God

Before we examine Abraham's calling it will be helpful to explore what it means to 'please' God.

- It has no connection with our idea of keeping someone happy in an official or legal sense. "I'll do it to keep so and so happy" I.e. to fulfill the letter of the law but with no intention or heart to relate.
- God is not waiting for us to 'get it right' so that he can then say he is pleased with us. Some Great Accountant image, ticking off moral requirements
- That which pleases God is relating, communion. We were made (structured) for relating before anything else we may have become. To relate involves mutual giving and receiving. This means trusting the expressions of love shown to us. So when a human being says to God I see your beauty and greatness and trust every word you say and can't wait for all the rewards of relating to you, this is pleasing to God for it means communion.

So how does God show us these things through Abraham?

His calling

When God came to Abraham he found a man deep into idolatry, the opposite to what pleased him. Instead of finding a true son a human-being, God found a man

attempting to fill his life by relating to something which had no life, no real existence. We know from Romans 1 that idolatry is not just an alternate religion. It is a choice to suppress the truth about God, believes a lie and to give ones attention and love to an illicit lover. The results of idolatry are terrible and soul-destroying.

- None of Abraham's idols ever spoke to him, let alone speak a word in which Abraham could discover himself and in which he could trust. All of the communication from his idols was a projection of his own desires.
- No idol could bring the great reward of communion with the One who made Abraham.

So Abraham was unpleasing to God in all his ways. He was lost from the only relationship which could truly fill him so he was not pleasing to himself. It was into this confusion that God came and revealed himself.

Then God shone a new light into Abraham

God sang a new song which rattled him to his core, broke him up and recreated him "*The God of glory appeared to Abraham*" or "*The glory of God appeared to Abraham.*" Both are acceptable translations of Acts 7:2.

So with Abraham actively seeking not to know the true God and deeply polluted by his practice of idolatry this presentation of God in all his glory before him was all of grace. Abraham was not looking for it, wanting it or ready in any moral or spiritual sense for what was to come. So any notion that Abraham was on a glorious free-willing search for God and happened upon the glory of God in his search is appealing to the flesh but unthinkable in real terms.

God did not come to Abraham with a challenge for him to rise up and be a better person. Most of the challenges we lay on people in the church presume that the heart is right, whereas the truth is that if the heart was right the challenge would be unnecessary. Challenges are often simply an appeal to the flesh and the ego. Abraham's flesh and ego were not things to which God could appeal if he was to turn this idolater into a man of trust.

God didn't even come with a strong (justifiable) rebuke against Abraham's idolatry. First he had to sing Abraham a better song than his idols; a song that would win his heart away from its illicit loves and darkening pollution. God came in such a way as to transport Abraham into a better place. He came with the grace of his glory which actually penetrates human idolatry and transforms the heart. Contrary to the bent of human thinking it is not law but grace which disciplines us and instructs us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires. It is grace not challenge or law which disciplines us to live truly and righteously and godly within our present culture and society. It is grace which pulls our vision out of ourselves and focuses it upon the hope to come to us in Jesus Christ (Titus 2:11ff).

So when God's call to Abraham to obey him and follow him into a whole new life was given, Abraham had a heart to hear, be enthralled, and with utter joy leap to obey. Under the power and tutelage of God's gifts Abraham couldn't wait to go into a whole new world.

It was an unknown but it was not a dark unknown for Abraham was now gripped and held and loved and filled by the one who said 'Go!' It is true that God commends Abraham for his faith as if it all came from Abraham. However, had we been able to check Abraham out about his faith I'm confident that he would have gone straight to the glory of God's grace saying, "I once was dead in my idolatry and its entail when suddenly God showed me his glorious grace".

The Birth of Isaac

Part of the blessing Abraham received from God at his calling was the covenant promise of a great family. This family would be a blessing to all the families on the earth. In a special way God had taken Abraham into his plan for the nations, his plan for community across tribes and tongues and peoples. What a fantastic 'reward' lay ahead for Abraham. It must have filled his heart with a sense of being in partnership with God. Everything he did he would have seen as significant. But great families have to begin with a son.

By grace God kept Abraham and Sarah childless till his nineties so that the child given would be known as God's before it was theirs. This was to show all Abraham's descendents that God was the maker of this great family. This was not going to be a strong family dynasty from a strong and wealthy man. This was going to be all of God. So God graced Abraham and Sarah with ninety years of barrenness. So that every time they looked at Isaac they saw grace not their own capabilities.

Barrenness was part of the way God prepared Abraham to have a simple childlike trust.

Was there a battle? Did the couple float through this period of their lives which at every barren turn seemed to contradict God's promise? Both Sarah and Abraham had their moments and a few wobbles.

But God's grace broke through their wobbles and disobedience, their desire to 'make God's plan happen' and Isaac was born. Through it all Paul says, Abraham's faith never wavered but grew in strength (Romans 4:20). Faith as gifted and created by God finds refining in testing not disintegration. God tests the faith he gives to show us how good and reliable he is.

The birth of Isaac begins to build the drama for the third incident to consider in this study: Abraham and Isaac with God on Mt. Moriah.

Abraham, the Boy of Grace and a Huge Test

The test was not just a matter of cold obedience on the part of Abraham. Would he do as God had said and offer up his son? It seems from Hebrews 11:19 that the whole event was about trusting God to raise Isaac from the dead. So when Abraham and Isaac set off to the mount Isaac was as good as dead. Yet on leaving his servants at the foot of the mountain Abraham said to them, "*I and the lad will go yonder, and we will worship and return to you*" (Genesis 22:5).

Read the whole account in Genesis 22:1-14

Often when discussing this extraordinary event we can range around in moralistic areas concerning human sacrifice etc. We need let God speak his mind about what was going on there.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, "In Isaac your descendants shall be called." He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type (Hebrews 11:17-19).

Believing that God would raise Isaac from the dead Abraham received him back as a type. Strange words. Figuratively Abraham received Isaac back from death. At the moment of greatest need God supplied the grace for his covenant love to proceed through Isaac.

What has God shown us through Abraham?

- God's pleasure is to have us as his treasured possession.
- Our communion of trust with God begins with a revelation of the glory of his grace.
- Trust is the principle of having a pleasing communion with God.
- The testing of faith is never being pushed into the dark but a testing of God's promises to us (Abraham believed Isaac would be raised because he was the heir God had given).
- In the horror and joy of Mt. Moriah Abraham saw the day of Jesus and was glad. There was a day coming, a day in which Abraham could trust, in which the Covenant Maker would offer his Son. Unlike with Abraham and Isaac there would be no one present on that day to stay the 'Striking of the Shepherd'.