

Abraham | Father Of The Faithful

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I heard a sermon recently about the life of Abraham and it got me thinking a lot about the man, his life and the choices that he made. There are very good reasons why he's described in the Bible as "the father of the faithful" (Romans 4:12) and "the friend of God".

It's worthwhile considering these two great epitaphs about a man who provides so much inspiration and encouragement for our own lives today.

Who Was Abraham?

Abraham, originally named Abram, was born (c 2000 BCE) and lived in the city of Ur, in what is now modern-day Iraq. Abraham was the son of Terah, ninth in descent from Noah, who was the main character in the Great Flood narrative found in Genesis 6-9. After the Great Flood, Noah's descendants settled and spread out from what is now modern Turkey, moving south into the region of Mesopotamia.

Ur was an important [Sumerian](#) city-state in ancient Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia, meaning "land between rivers", has long been called the cradle of civilisation and the region was one of the four riverine civilisations where writing was invented. Once a coastal city, near the mouth of the Euphrates on the Persian Gulf, the coastline has shifted over time and Ur is now well inland, on the south bank of the Euphrates, in modern-day Iraq.

As with all the city-states, Ur was centered on a temple

dedicated to the particular patron god or goddess of the city. The city was ruled over by a priestly governor or a king, who was intimately tied to religious rites that took place in the city.

It was a wealthy, prosperous and advanced city, with culture, religion and social structures firmly established. This cradle of civilisation was also the seat of a vigorous polytheism, chief of whom was *Nanna*, the Sumero-Akkadian moon god.

It is with this rich and complex background that Abraham is introduced to us in Genesis 12. This is where God appears to Abraham for the first time, telling him to leave all that was familiar and travel to an unknown place.

Hebrews 11, the great dissertation on faith, expands further, telling us that *“by an act of faith, Abraham said **yes to God’s call** to travel to an unknown place that would become his home. When he left, he had no idea where he was going”* (Hebrews 11:8-10).

The Call Of Abraham

God’s call has been echoing down the centuries, appealing to any who would listen. Isaiah 55 likens this call to the provision of thirst-quenching water, free of charge, to those who are dying of thirst.

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” Isaiah 55:1, ESV

Abraham, surrounded by gods of every description, was dying of spiritual thirst and eagerly accepted the call of the one true God when it came. However, the most interesting and thought-provoking aspect of Abraham’s acceptance is the fact that **he had no idea where he was going.**

Think for a moment what Abraham was leaving behind in Ur; the comforts and security of a highly advanced civilisation, the birthplace of culture, learning, and writing. A well-established society, wealthy and prosperous.

He left all this on the word and promise of God (Genesis 12:1-3). He chose to enter into God's story and this choice was the turning point in his life. It was a risky decision from Abraham's perspective, based only on trust, and it is this extreme act of faith that enabled God to count him righteous ("justify" him) and guaranteed him the title of father of the faithful. He "*trusted God to set him right, instead of trying to be right on his own*" (Romans 4:1-3)

Paul, when commenting at length on the life of Abraham (Romans 4), does not say "Abraham *worked* for God and therefore was justified." Neither does he say "Abraham *undertook acts of love* and, because of this, was justified." or that "Abraham *made progress in character reformation* and therefore was justified.

He says, "Abraham ***believed*** God and that faith was credited to him as righteousness."

It is the one aspect that elevates Abraham to the superior example of what faith is and why, without it, it's impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Hebrews 11 further indicates that faith is not about what we 'know' but is confidence and trust in God and belief that His promises are sure.

I find this remarkable: the word *believe* used in Mark 16:16 in relation to the preaching of the gospel ("whoever *believes* and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not *believe* will be condemned") is the same word used in Hebrews 11:6 describing Abraham's decision to leave Ur. It's a translation of the Greek word *pisteōs* (πίστεως) and means 'to have faith' or 'to entrust'.

Abraham *believed* that God exists and that He rewards those who

seek Him (without any facts or proof at that time that this was true). Then, he then acted upon it (living faith).

He demonstrated the kind of faith/belief that was worth commentary in Hebrews. And not just commentary, it's the kind of faith we are to model.

It certainly wasn't built on His 'correct doctrinal understanding' of God. It was trust *in* God. The reality is that when he left, he had no idea where he was going and, likely, a limited revelation, at the time, of the God whose call he was responding to. He simply *entrusted* his story into God's safekeeping and believed that God was good for His word. This is the definition of belief.

God looks to our heart. He's far more interested in who we can become, than in who we are right now. He's also not impressed by the amount of catechisms we can recite or how much we know. None of those things are equivalent to the biblical meaning of 'belief'. 'Believing' is *to have faith*, specifically, to have faith in the promise of God, not 'to have agreement to doctrine'.

Believing is firstly a posture of the heart. *Having faith* is trusting God and believing in His provision of 'water without cost'. Faith is looking away from our hopeless, ungodly self and looking to God's grace.

The fulfillment of God's promise to us depends entirely on trusting God and embracing Him and what He is doing.

This book [the Bible] is different. This is a world of revelation: God revealing to people just like us – men and women created in God's image – how He works and what is going on in this world in which we find ourselves. At the same time that God reveals all this, God draws us by invitation and command to participate in His working life. We gradually (or suddenly) realise that we are insiders in the most significant action of our time as God establishes His grand

rule of love and justice on this earth (as it is in heaven). 'Revelation' means that we are reading something we couldn't have guessed at or figured out on our own." | Eugene Peterson

Abraham Becomes A Father

Abraham is, quite literally, the father of the Jewish and Muslim peoples of the world but he became a father, long before either of his sons, from whom these descendants would come, were born. He was and is styled "father" of all those people who would embrace what God is doing for them and who believe and trust in that work. Abraham is the father of us all, if we choose it (Romans 4:18).

Accepting God's call in our own life, entering into the same promises made to Abraham, and trusting that God will make good on His word brings us into the great story of what God is doing with humanity.

"Long ago the Scriptures said God would accept the Gentiles because of their faith. This is why God told Abraham the good news that all nations would be blessed because of him." | Galatians 3:8, CEV

Abraham – The Friend Of God

God really wants us to know Him and trust Him. He always has. His plan from the very beginning was to have a relationship with us. Even when it seemed like we had ruined every chance of that, He went out of His way to put measures in place to repair the relationship, by sending His son to save the world.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." | John 3:16, ESV

Faith is what brings us to that place of being "put right with

God” but it is faith, meshed with action, that really brings us into a full relationship with Him.

The all-encompassing meaning of belief is intrinsically linked with the actions that back it up – seamless *believing and doing*. It isn’t the doing that makes us right, but it’s impossible to show our faith, without the doing. James tells us that it’s like separating a body from the life force or spirit within – all you end up with is a corpse (James 2:18-26).

It is this [faith, coupled with action](#) – *believing and doing* – that elevates Abraham from being not just a “father of faith” but also the “friend of God” – participant in a close and intimate relationship of knowing and being known.

Abraham is now regarded as one of the most influential people in all of history. The world’s three largest monotheistic religions—in fact possibly monotheism itself—found their beginnings with him. Over 3 billion people in the modern world cite Abraham as the “father” of their religion. Abraham was promised by his God descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky, but today two branches of his family, the Jews and the Muslims, continue to battle for his birthright. – Encyclopedia.com

Epilogue

What did Abraham find in a strange and unknown place?

What Abraham found was grace in the eyes of God, through faith alone. God drew him to faith and God counted that faith as righteousness – as a “right standing with God”.

His great legacy and true birthright is as the Father of Faith to countless people who have come after him, regardless of their social status ([Jeremiah 22:3](#)), ethnicity ([Acts 10:34-35](#)), or gender ([Galatians 3:28](#)).

Having faith or believing isn't measured by an exhaustive list of facts we say we agree with but rather the act of entrusting our lives to God [through the work of His Son] and acting and living in a way that shows we believe His promise to be true.

The phrase *to believe* can sometimes be hijacked and become synonymous with *agreement to a list of doctrines*, but to make it this loses the living reality of what is meant by the word and contradicts the examples given to us of those who *believed* ('had faith').

The solid rock of confidence in Christ must be the starting point of a Christian's faith, not an extensive list of facts to which they may give agreement, but their heart possibly remains unconverted.

Abraham knew very little but gave all his heart in confidence and trust to God. Perhaps we would call this *allegiance*. Perhaps we ought to speak more of *allegiance* and less of *doctrine* when evangelising.

We're not joining a club when we become Christians, we're giving our lives in trust to the Master and this trust will hold us far more steadily through the buffeting waves of life than all the facts (true or otherwise) that we've collected in our heads.

Having faith like Abraham looks like not always knowing what the next step is, what the future will look like, or even how we'll get there. But it also looks like movement and transition; a stepping forward in confidence, believing in the One who does know what the future holds, trusting that He is a good, good Father and a rewarder of those who seek Him.

"We don't believe something by merely saying we believe it, or even when we believe that we believe it. We believe something when we act as if it were true."| Dallas Willard

Abraham's journey in faith towards the great unknown can become ours too. We just have to accept God's call and take that first step...

Further Recommended Reading

1. The subject of faith, coupled with action, is one of the great threads running through the Bible and makes for interesting and inspiring reading. I would recommend the following chapters as further reading on the subject: Genesis 12, Romans 4, Hebrews 11, and James 2.

2. As always, I value feedback and conversation, so I'd love your comments and thoughts on this subject!