

# What Is A Disciple?

The word *disciple* occurs frequently throughout the Bible and [‘discipleship’](#) is something that the Bible references often. But what does the word *disciple* actually mean? And what does it mean to be a *disciple of Jesus*?

## What Is A Disciple?

Our English language Bibles were translated from manuscripts written primarily in two languages; Hebrew (in the Old Testament) and Greek (in the New Testament). The translative history of the Bible is a fascinating journey, from an academic and historical perspective, and is well worth exploring. You can [read more about the translation process here](#).

In the original language of the New Testament, the word *disciple* is translated from a Greek word, *mathētēs* (μαθητής), from *manthano*, meaning “to learn”. *Mathētēs* therefore means (unsurprisingly) *a learner, a pupil or a scholar*. More accurately though, it means to be a learner *in the style of an apprentice*, that is, someone who not only accepts the views of their teacher but is also practising the same so as to eventually become like their teacher (Matthew 10:24, Luke 6:40).

It’s a word that would have been in common use during ancient times and its meaning was applicable beyond a Christian or religious setting (ie as a disciple of Plato or Socrates). Although the word has several applications, in the widest sense it refers to those who accept the teachings of anyone, not only in belief but also in life and practice.

## Who Is A Disciple Of Jesus?

When we come to the Bible, we see the word *disciple* used most

often in the context of a follower of Jesus and sometimes of John the Baptist (Matthew 27:57, Luke 14:27, Matthew 11:1, John 3:25). Throughout the gospels, it's the only name used for those who followed Jesus, and even those who had only been baptised with the baptism of John the Baptist (and hadn't received the Holy Spirit) were called disciples (Acts 19:1-4).

It would be accurate to say that a disciple of Jesus was someone who [believed the teachings of Jesus](#), who surrendered to his leadership, and who endeavoured to imitate his life.

When we move into the early history of the church (found in the book called the Acts of the Apostles), we see these disciples began to be called *Christians* (from the Greek word Χριστιανός (Christianos), meaning "follower of Christ") (Acts 11:26).

## The Acts Of The Apostles

The book of the Acts of the Apostles provides a unique glimpse into the story of the early Christians, and to a time when these disciples of Jesus took their faith and began boldly proclaiming it to the world. In Acts, we are observing the very birth of Christianity – the movement which recognised and preached a resurrected Jesus as the promised saviour and king of the world.

The Book of Acts opens with this introductory paragraph by its author, Luke, also one of the four Gospel writers and one of Jesus' 12 closest disciples:

*"Dear Theophilus, in the first volume of this book I wrote on everything that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he said goodbye to the Apostles, the ones he had chosen through the Holy Spirit, and was taken up to heaven. After his death, he presented himself alive to them in many different settings over a period of forty days. In face-to-face meetings, he talked to them about thing concerning the kingdom of God." |*

## Acts 1:1-4, MSG

The book's narrative describes the disciples as first-hand witnesses to the resurrected Jesus; witnesses to the astonishing truth of the Gospel message, and how they took that Good News to the world, beginning first in Jerusalem, then moving throughout Judea and eventually to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7-8).

The interactive map below shows the power of their witness to the gospel message, demonstrating not just areas where professing Christians are the majority of the population, nor where Christianity has been declared the national religion, but also the true extent of the global spread of the gospel since the first century. It's a powerful, visual reminder of God's promise to save people "from every tribe and language and people and nation." (Revelation 5:9)

## What Was The Good News?

Peter the Apostle, when making his speech to the Jews in Jerusalem after the day of Pentecost, summarised the Good News in this way:

*"Jesus the Nazarene, a man thoroughly accredited by God to you – the miracles and wonders and signs that God did through him are common knowledge – this Jesus, following [the deliberate and well-thought-out plan of God](#), was betrayed by men who took the law into their own hands, and was handed over to you. And you pinned him to a cross and killed him. But God untied the death ropes and [raised him up](#). Death was no match for him...All Israel, then, know this: There's no longer room for doubt – God made him Master and Messiah, this Jesus whom you killed on a cross. Change your life. Turn to God and [be baptised](#), each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is targeted to you and your*

*children, but also to all who are far away—whomever, in fact, our Master God invites.” | Acts 2:26-40, MSG*

Peter is attesting to the validity of Jesus of Nazareth, as God’s appointed saviour and king. He is witnessing to the truth of the resurrected Jesus and the confirmation of his true identity as Son of God. And he is urging his listeners to believe this truth, to surrender their lives to Jesus and receive God’s promise of forgiveness of sins and the hope of life, even after death. In short, he is urging them to become disciples of Jesus, followers and imitators of the Christ. He is urging them to become Christians!

The number of people who heard his message and believed his words on that day was incredible! The book of Acts tells us that over 3000 people [were baptised](#). And not only that, every day their number grew as God added those who were saved. (Acts 2:47)

*“That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptised and were signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, [the life together](#), the common meal, and the prayers.” | Acts 2:41-42, MSG*

## **The Teachings Of Jesus: The Gospel Of Good News**

Peter was, in reality, only reconfirming the teachings of Jesus; that of the Good News of salvation for humanity and truth of the kingdom of God; God’s rightful rule and sovereignty over all the earth ([Matthew 16:27](#), [Luke 21:26-27](#), [James 2:5](#), [1 Corinthians 2:9](#), [Numbers 14:21](#), [Psalm 22:27](#), [Habakkuk 2:14](#)).

*“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.” | Mathew 4:23, NIV*

*“Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God. “The time is fulfilled,” He said, “and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the gospel!” | Mark 1:14, BSB*

*“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me, for the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed.” | Isaiah 61:1, NLT*

*“Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” | Matthew 9:13, ESV*

*Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.” | Luke 17:20-21, NKJV*

## **How Do I Become A Disciple?**

Becoming a Christian and becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ **is the same thing**; we just don't really use the word disciple much anymore. The basis for us to become Christians remains the same as for those in the first century, who were Jesus' followers. So what is it that makes us a *disciple of Jesus*? What is it that makes us a *Christian*?

We need to look no further than Peter's words to the people at Jerusalem (Acts 2:22-42):

- We must believe that Jesus was **God-sent and God-endorsed, as the appointed saviour and king of the world**. We acknowledge that Jesus came as one of us, [like](#)

us in every way, so that he could defeat sin and death on our behalf (1 John 4:14, Galatians 4:4, John 3:16, Hebrews 2:14-17, Romans 5:12).

- We must believe that Jesus **died for the sins of the world** and was raised to life, never to die again (1 John 2:2, John 4:42, 1 John 3:5, Acts 2:32, Acts 3:15, 1 Corinthians 6:14, Romans 8:11).
- We must be **convicted of our sin, acknowledging our need for God's forgiveness and recognising that the name of Jesus is the only name under heaven by which humanity can be saved** (Ecclesiastes 7:20, 1 John 1:9-10, Romans 3:23, James 1:15 Acts 4:12, 1 Timothy 2:5).
- We must believe in the teachings of Jesus and **surrender to his guidance and leadership in our life**, not only as an apprentice to a teacher, but as a willing subject of God's designated King. Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and earth, he has first claim on our affections, he is the motivating force in our decisions and the final judge of our soul (Matthew 28:18-20, Isaiah 9:6, Luke 1:33, Acts 10:36, 1 Corinthians 15:27, Colossians 1:27, Romans 8:10, Ephesians 3:16, Acts 10:42, John 5:22. 2 Timothy 4:8, James 1:21, 1 Peter 2:25).
- We must **follow the example of Jesus and be baptised**, as directed in Mark 16:16. Baptism is God's arrangement for a person to gain a clean conscience based on their faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We choose to end one kind of life and begin another and the way of demonstrating that choice is to be baptised 'for the repentance of our sins'. The Bible compares baptism to burial, 'dying' to our past course of life and beginning a new one as a Christian, dedicated to God and saved through Jesus (Matthew 3:15, Matthew 10:28, Acts 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21, Colossians 2:12, Mark 16:16, Matthew

28:19-20, Ephesians 4:4-6).

Written about 300 years after the birth of Christ, [the Apostles' Creed](#) summarises foundational Christian beliefs taught by the early church and is a bold declaration of our faith in Jesus Christ. It particularly affirms the teachings regarding Jesus, that of his virgin birth, his crucifixion, his death, and his subsequent resurrection; core elements of the gospel of good news. It is a primary statement of faith shared by Christians around the world, uniting them in common union with the work achieved in and through Jesus.

## **Not Just A Disciple Of Jesus But Family Of God**

Welcome to the family! When God puts you in Jesus, He also puts you [in community](#). When you believe and are baptised, you become a disciple of Jesus – a Christian – but not only that, you also become a valued member of God's family (1 Corinthians 12:27, Galatians 4:7, Romans 8:17, Galatians 3:26, 1 John 3:1-2, Ephesians 2:18-19, Ephesians 3:14-19). Becoming a Christian means you join a great cloud of faithful witnesses to the truth of the resurrected Christ (Hebrews 12:1), as believers of the message of Good News and disciples of Christ the King.

*“If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.” | [Romans 10:10, NIV](#)*

<https://vimeo.com/113801439>

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# Abraham | Father Of The Faithful

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

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 Sumerian-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...

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### **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!