

Abraham's Faith

Romans 4:16-17

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There's a children's song we used to do at camp and other places. It goes

Father Abraham had many kids,
many kids had Father Abraham
and I am one of them and so are you
so let's all praise the Lord

There are motions that go with each verse. You keep adding motions and by the end everybody is swinging their arms, marching and bobbing their heads until the last "sit down!"

It's a good song to get kids moving and having fun. But who is Father Abraham and why do we sing about him? And why do we say we're his children?

Abraham and his wife Sarah are the ancestors of the Hebrew people, the Israelites. Several chapters in the book of Genesis (12-25) tell their story. Abraham is mentioned many times throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.

As the apostle Paul writes to the church in Rome, he's still trying to convince Jewish believers in Jesus that non-Jewish believers have an equal share with them in the status of right relationship with God through faith in Jesus. He uses one of the Jewish believers' great heroes, Abraham, to make the point. God had promised Abraham that he would be the "father of many nations." The word "nations" could be translated "Gentiles." All through Romans 4, Paul affirms that Abraham is the father of us all, the father of all who believe, all who have faith like his. Abraham is the father in faith of everyone who believes in Jesus.

What was Abraham's faith? What did he believe? Where did he put his faith? He believed in God and he believed God's promises. And that belief, that confidence in God was what God counted as righteousness.

Abraham was in right standing with God through faith. And this was before Abraham was circumcised and long before the law was given through Moses. So Jewish believers who depended on observing the law and on things that made them distinct as Jews needed to see that Abraham was counted right with God through faith before he did any of those kinds of things.

It's amazing that Abraham believed in the Lord God and trusted God's promises. When Abraham heard God's call and said yes, he was starting from scratch. There was no Bible. Abraham didn't know the Ten Commandments—they hadn't been given yet. The story of Moses, Mount Sinai, the giving of the Law, priests leading worship, sacrifices in the temple, King David, the Psalms—none of that had happened yet. Abraham didn't know stories about the Lord God. He'd been brought up believing in many gods.

At one point Joshua said to the Israelites, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel says: 'Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods'" (Joshua 24:2). Like everyone else in his culture, Abraham was a pagan in a pagan world. As far as we know, Abraham's first interaction with the living, good, all-powerful, personal Lord God is when God says to him, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you" and then promises to bless Abraham and bless the whole world through him and his family (Genesis 12:1-3; see John Ortberg, "Faith Alone"

www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2012/july/faithalone.html).

The key is in Abraham's response: "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him" (Gen 12:4). What can Abraham's story show us about faith? What can it teach us about believing God, relating to God, walking with God? Let's review some of Abraham and Sarah's story and see how they are our ancestors in faith.

God promised to give Abraham descendants and land. This old couple who'd been unable to have children were now promised that they would have a son and many descendants. Abraham got caught up in God's vision, God's plan, God's dream. He became God's means of fulfilling the

plan. Abraham eventually shared God's vision, but God's vision was greater than Abraham's and it was greater than he knew.

God had more invested in Abraham and Sarah than they had invested in themselves. God didn't just want them to have a family. They were part of God's plan for all humanity. God's goal was the redemption of the world.

As we look to the future, let's seek to hear God's call and share God's vision. God has more invested in us and our ministry than we do. God has more invested in this church than we do.

The vision can be threatened by human schemes. Abraham and Sarah tried on occasion to take their future into their own hands or they did things that could prevent God's promises from being fulfilled. In Egypt they lied, saying that Sarah was Abraham's sister instead of his wife. What would have become of the promise if Sarah had remained in Pharaoh's harem? They barely squeaked out of that situation and later did the same thing in Canaan!

They also doubted that Sarah would really be able to bear a child, so she gave Abraham her servant Hagar as a wife (Gen 16). But God's intention was that Abraham *and Sarah* would be parents.

Instead of scheming how we can help God do what only God can do, we need to be faithful in what God tells us to do. Instead of wandering off into disobedience, we need to stay close to God's purposes.

God's vision and God's promise are confirmed in covenant. We see this repeated throughout the story.

In chapter 15, "The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision." God told him not to be afraid: "I am your shield, your very great reward." God is sovereign and God is all Abraham needs.

But Abraham is struggling. He can't see how God's promise will come true. "I still don't have any children."

Then God said, "Come on outside, Abraham. Try to count the stars. That's how your descendants will be—too many to count!"

And Abraham believed the LORD. And God counted that believing as righteousness—right relationship, right standing with God. This is what Paul emphasizes in Romans 4. He quotes Genesis 15 several times as he makes his point about Abraham's faith.

God wants the kind of relationship with people where we trust him and believe his promises. God is more interested in a relationship with us than he is in all the things we do. God wants us to walk with him. As we walk with God, we arrive at the place he wants us to be. God's will and God's vision are always wrapped up in the relationship he wants to have with us. And we relate to God, we walk with God by faith. And in that sense, we are all children of Abraham.

Rich Mullins captured this in his song *Sometimes by Step* that includes this great line:

Sometimes I think of Abraham,
How one star he saw had been lit for me

In the second part of Genesis 15 God confirms the promise and covenant of the land. Abraham asks, "How can I know that I will possess the land?"

God doesn't answer Abraham's question directly. Instead, God orders him to prepare the sacrifices for a covenant ceremony. Abraham cut the animals in two, laid the halves out, and drove away vultures that came down on the carcasses.

In the ceremony of "cutting a covenant," people would walk between the parts of the sacrificed animals, making their pledges and promises to each other, knowing that if they broke the agreement, they would be slain like those animals.

In this covenant, God puts Abraham to sleep and then God passes through the midst of Abraham's sacrifice. God takes upon himself full responsibility for the covenant. In answer to Abraham's question, "How can I know I'll have what you promised?" God binds himself to Abraham in a covenant relationship. "You have Me—my commitment and faithfulness." That's what God promises us. And that's what God gives us in Jesus the Messiah.

Even after all this, Abraham and Sarah have trouble trusting God to do what he has said. In chapter 17, God again confirms the covenant and changes Abram and Sarai's names to Abraham and Sarah. Then God

repeats the promise of descendants. And Abraham falls on the ground laughing. It's been nearly twenty-five years since God first called Abraham and made these promises to him. Abraham is 100 years old and Sarah is ninety. The promise seems even more impossible and absurd.

God again appears to Abraham (ch 18) and predicts that Abraham and Sarah's son will be born within the year. This time Sarah laughs. After all these years of living with this promise, it seems ridiculous that it's really going to happen.

Do you ever feel that way? You've struggled for so long, things have been the same for so long. Can we ever change? Can things ever be different? God says yes!

In response to Sarah's laughter, the LORD said, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" God is getting ready to do a major miracle. He's waited this long to show that he's really the One doing it, to show that this promise is impossible from a human point of view.

In a sermon I heard about Abraham and Sarah, the preacher said that if you had asked Abraham at various times, "What do you believe? What's the essence of your faith?" he'd reply, "See these hills? My Friend said my descendants would live here."

"Well, how many children do you have?"

"None yet."

Then, after this latest appearance of God, imagine Abraham going to town and buying a baby stroller. He wheels it home and sets it in the front room where it becomes quite a conversation piece.

"Why a stroller, Abe?"

"Sarah and I are going to have a child."

"Abe, have you been to a doctor lately? Do you realize how old you are? How do you know you're going to have a child?"

And Abraham says, "See these hills?"

The promised child was finally born. Abraham named him Isaac as God told him to. Isaac means "laughter." Abraham and Sarah had laughed at the promise of God. But God had the last laugh. Because God saw in Isaac not just Abraham and Sarah's fulfillment. God saw another promised child, a descendant of Abraham and Isaac, one who would be the

redemption of the world—Jesus. God saw the final fulfillment of his plan and vision. And because of that, when Isaac was born, the LORD God laughed for joy (Dennis Kinlaw. I heard his sermon on audiotape years ago—not sure of place or date). We’re invited to laugh with God by faith.

With Abraham, we also discover that faith is sometimes tested. And it’s proved in obedience. God said to Abraham, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you” (Gen 22:2). How could this be? Isaac was the child of promise. God’s promises were to be fulfilled through him. But now the command of God was to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham is forced into radical trust in God. The book of Hebrews says that Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead (11:19). Paul says here that the God Abraham believed in is the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not. Abraham obeyed God’s call to sacrifice Isaac. But before Isaac could be killed, God provided a ram as a substitute. Abraham named that place “The LORD Will Provide” (Gen 22:14).

Years ago, I read a book about various Bible characters by an Old Testament scholar. He concluded his chapter on Abraham this way:

I can never think about Abraham’s willingness to offer up his son Isaac without thinking of God’s willingness to offer up His Son Jesus. God provided a lamb to take Isaac’s place, but there was no lamb to take Jesus’ place. *He was the Lamb!* You and I have our life and our salvation and our hope of eternity because of what God has done for us in Christ; and the only way this world will ever come to know the salvation that we know will be by way of our faithfulness. God expects us to be faithful. (William S. LaSor, *Great Personalities of the Old Testament*)

Mt. Moriah, the mountain where Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac, is where Jerusalem was later built. When Jesus climbed that mountain, carrying his cross, God didn’t intervene. God didn’t stop the sacrifice. God did what he had told Abraham to do—God gave up his Son to death. And

God was actually giving himself in Jesus. There's not a separation between the Father and the Son. There was no ram to substitute for Jesus, but Jesus became the substitute for all of us. Hebrews says that, in a figurative sense, Abraham received Isaac back from the dead. But God actually brought his Son back from death. God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him as Lord of all.

In many ways Abraham was an average, ignorant, confused, superstitious, cowardly man. So why does Paul say that Abraham's faith was strong and that he didn't waver in unbelief concerning God's promise? Because through it all, Abraham waited for God to keep his promise. He realized that only God could give him a son and descendants. The hero of the story isn't Abraham; the hero is God (Ortberg).

Abraham is the ancestor of those who believe. And his story shows us that it's not the quality of our faith that saves us; it's the object of our faith that saves us (Ortberg). It's who we believe in. It's not that we have to have perfect faith or the right amount of faith. It's that we have faith in the Lord God who is faithful. We can have small faith in the big God. Like Abraham, we can believe in the God who gives life to the dead. God gave Abraham and Sarah a child when their bodies were as good as dead. He gave Isaac back to them when he was almost sacrificed. God raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

Like Abraham, we believe in the God who calls into being things that were not. In the beginning God said, "Let there be" and there was. God created a new family, a new nation through Abraham and Sarah. God began a new creation when he became a human in Jesus. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God called into being a whole new kind of life. When we trust him and receive this new life from him, God makes us new people.