

The Story of Redemption



God Reaching Out to Restore **COMMUNITY**
through the cross of Jesus Christ



**What Does It Mean to Trust God?
Part 3: Faith and the Promise to Abraham**

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What Does It Mean to Trust God?

Part 3: Faith and the Promise to Abraham

History can be fascinating. Many people enjoy learning about ancient nations and rulers such as the Pharaohs of Egypt or the Caesars of the Roman Empire. Others enjoy reading accounts of the American Civil War or World War II. All of these major events and peoples throughout history, however, raise an important question: Where has God been through all of this? While a lot of good has happened throughout history, a lot of evil has occurred as well. Is God unconcerned or unaware with the state the world is in? What about our lives? Does he care about us?

It is not always easy to see God's plan for the world and for our lives. But God has been actively working throughout history to bring love and peace to us. We begin learning more about his plan in the story of Abraham.



1. GOD MAKES A GREAT REQUEST.

Abraham was first known as Abram. He was one of the distant descendants of Seth, the third child of Adam and Eve. Abram lived in the land of Haran, which was most likely modern-day Syria. It was here that the Lord spoke to Abram and said,

^{1b} “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you” (Gen. 12:1).

What God asks Abram to do may not seem like much, but think about it for a minute. Imagine picking up your family, leaving the United States—permanently—and settling in another country. What would you give up?

If you went to a third-world country, you might have to give up modern conveniences like indoor plumbing, quality health care, and Internet access. If you went to an industrialized country or region like Europe, many things would be the same; however, there would still be the loss of close contact with friends, parents, or children. You would probably have to learn a new language and a new culture. And even mundane tasks like driving or shopping for groceries would be a hassle (have you ever tried to read traffic signs in German?).

Then imagine doing all of this 4000 years ago, when the closest thing to Internet access was whatever rumors the local traveling sheep herder might know. There were no cell phones to keep in contact with family and friends, and you might never see or hear from them again. What would it take to do all of this, packing up and following someone to who knows where and leaving everything you know behind?

For us to change our lives and follow someone like this would require a great amount of trust in that person. The Bible calls that type of trust *faith*.

Do you have faith in God? Why or why not?

2. GOD MAKES A GREAT PROMISE.

God told Abram to leave his country, but along with this command came a great promise or covenant. God said to Abram:

*“I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing . . .
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:2-3b).*

Here are a few things to note about the different aspects of God’s promise to Abram:

- God tells Abram that **he will make him into a great nation**, but at the time he has no children. How will he do this?
- God tells Abram that **he will bless him**, but there is no indication that Abram had done anything to earn this blessing.
- God tells Abram that **he will make his name great**, the very thing the people of the Tower of Babel had sought to do on their own. In this case, God freely offers to make Abram’s name great. And the very fact that we are reading about him today shows that God kept his word.
- God tells Abram that **all peoples on earth will be blessed through him**. This is an incredibly bold and grand claim. *All peoples* will be blessed? How? And in what way?

This was truly a great covenant that God made with Abram, and there were a couple of things that were unusual about this covenant. First, in most covenants both sides are equal partners, and there is give and take on both sides. In this covenant, God does all of the blessing. The only thing that God asks Abram to do is to place his faith in him and to go where he tells him. There was nothing Abram did or could do that would earn him the right to these blessings; he just had to accept them. As we will later see, this is also the nature of the Christian covenant that God makes with us.

Second, covenants are usually sealed with some guarantee. This covenant, however, was guaranteed by nothing more than God’s own good character.

What would God have to do to fulfill this covenant? What does this tell us about God’s working in the world?

For us to change our lives and follow someone requires a great amount of trust. The Bible calls this *faith*.

3. ABRAM HAS A GREAT RESPONSE.

God's good word and character were enough for Abram. Note how he responds to God's command.

⁴ So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. ⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there . . . (Gen. 12:4-5).

Abram trusted God, and he picked up his family and went where God told him to go. Through this, Abram shows us that true faith in God results in action. After Abram demonstrates his faith, God adds another blessing to the covenant:

⁷ The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him (Gen. 12:7).

God gives the land of Canaan to Abram's offspring, the Israelites. In response to this, Abram builds an altar, an ancient form of worship. This again shows Abram's faith that God would fulfill his promise, even though Abram himself would never possess this land since it was to be given to his descendants.

Despite his faith, however, Abram still would question how God's promise would work itself out. Some time later, the Lord appears to Abram and tells him that he is his "shield" and his "very great reward" (Gen. 15:1). This time Abram's response is quite different. Abram says,

"O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir" (Gen. 15:2-3).

God is not upset or insulted at Abram's questioning. Note the Lord's response:

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." ⁵ He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be" (Gen. 15:4-5).

God responds to Abram by patiently explaining his plan to him more fully. He even adds another element to the promise, saying that **his offspring will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens**. After God tells Abram this,

⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6).



God promised to make Abram's descendants as numerous as the stars.

We see from this exchange that people of faith sometimes question God, and



Asking God questions shows you are on the pathway to faith.

God understands this. It may be that you have questioned God—who he is, what his plan for your life is, or what he is doing in this world. If you have lost a loved one, been diagnosed with cancer, or have experienced the pain of divorce, these questions will arise.

Asking these questions does not show that you do not have faith; instead, it shows that you are seeking God for answers. As long as you are seeking God, you are on the pathway to faith. In the end, though, we hope to be like Abram and “believe” God—have trust in him.

Do you think that you have faith in God like Abram had?

4. ABRAM MAKES SOME MISTAKES.

Abram was a great man and would later become known as the “father of faith.” However, he was not a perfect man. In fact, sometimes he would show a profound lack of “trust” in God. His less than stellar moments include the following.

- *Lying to the Egyptians (Gen. 12:10-20).* A famine arises in the land where Abram is, and so Abram goes down with his wife to Egypt to get food. He has a problem, however. His wife Sarai (who would later be called Sarah) is very beautiful, and Abram is afraid that the Egyptians will kill him, a foreigner, and take his wife. So he instructs Sarai to tell the Egyptians that she is his sister so that they will not try to kill him.

This lie works so well that the Pharaoh not does not kill Abram, instead, he takes Sarai into his palace to be his wife. The Lord inflicts “serious diseases” on Pharaoh and his household because of this, and the Pharaoh gives Abram back his wife. The question arises, Why would a great man of faith do this? Did he not believe that God would protect him?

- *Giving in to impatience (Gen. 16:1-16).* In order for God to fulfill his promise to make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, Abram would obviously have to have children. The problem is, ten years pass and Abram still has no children. Sarai begins to blame God, telling Abram, “The Lord has kept me from having children.” So she decides to take matters into her own hands, urging Abram to sleep with her maidservant, Hagar, so that she could have children through her.

Abram does as Sarai asks, and the results are disastrous. As soon as Hagar finds out that she is pregnant she begins to despise Sarai. This re-

The Bible is filled with real people with real problems.

sults in Sarai mistreating Hagar so badly that she runs away from her mistress, fleeing into the desert. God would take care of this young mother and her child, Ishmael, but great harm had been done. Why was Abram so impatient? Where was his trust in God?

- *Laughing when God tells him that he will have a son (Gen. 17:1-22).* When God again tells Abram that Sarai will bear a child, he cannot help but laugh. Not only has he heard this before, but his wife is now 90 years old!



Abraham's faith was rewarded when his wife gave birth to Isaac.

What do these three mistakes show us? They show us that the Bible is filled with real people who faced real problems. Sometimes they struggled in trusting God, just as we do. What does God do in times like these? He continues to work in our lives, as he did with Abraham and Sarah. God kept his promise, and Sarah had a child named Isaac. When the child was born, their faith was confirmed.

Even if it has been hard to see, do you feel that God has been working in your life?

5. GRACE AND PROMISE CONTINUE WITH JESUS CHRIST.

Do you remember the question that remained from the last lesson? What happened to the pattern of sin, punishment for sin, and grace that we saw in the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain, and Noah's world? In the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11), the people clearly sinned, they were punished by God, and yet, where was the grace?

The grace continues with Abraham, the story immediately following the Tower of Babel. God told Abraham,

¹⁸Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed (Gen. 22:18).

Who is this offspring? As we turn now to the pages of the New Testament, we see that it begins with the following words:

¹A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham (Mt. 1:1).

Jesus is the offspring of Abraham and the one through whom everyone will be blessed. God worked over the course of thousands of years to bring Jesus into the world at just the right time. He kept his promise.

Many times God's hand throughout history is subtle and hard to trace. Maybe his work in your life has been hard to see as well. But rest assured that God has been working in your life to bring you back into a relationship with him.

In the next part of the story, we will see how and why God became "one of us" as the *Story of Redemption* continues.

QUESTIONS:

Multiple Choice.

1. _____ Which of the following did Abraham NOT leave behind in moving from Haran?
 - a. His father's household.
 - b. His wife.
 - c. His country.
 - d. His people.
2. _____ Which of the following is NOT true about faith?
 - a. It means trust.
 - b. It means you do not question God.
 - c. It results in action.
 - d. It results in worship and thanksgiving.
3. _____ Which of the following is NOT true about the covenant made with Abraham?
 - a. It was made without any guarantee except God's word and character.
 - b. The blessings of the covenant were limited only to Abraham's descendants.
 - c. Abraham never questioned how God would fulfill the covenant.

4. Fill in the Blank.

4. Abraham believed God, and God credited this to him as _____.
5. Sarai was _____ years old when she gave birth to Isaac.

Matching.

6. _____ Means "promise."
7. _____ Means "trust."
8. _____ Abraham's wife's first name
9. _____ The one through whom all peoples would be blessed.
10. _____ The child of Abraham and his handmaiden, Hagar.
 - a. Ishmael
 - b. faith
 - c. Jesus
 - d. Sarai
 - e. covenant

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