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THE CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM AND THE CHILDREN OF GOD

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, God promised to make him a “father of many nations,” and God changed his name from “Abram,” which means “exalted father,” to “Abraham,” which means “father of a multitude” (Genesis 17:4-5).

Three strangers came one day to Abraham and Sarah’s tent, and Abraham and Sarah hastened to prepare a meal for them. The men prophesied that within a year Sarah would give birth to a son. Although Sarah laughed at this, it came to pass, just as the strangers said, and Isaac was born.

While Isaac was still a lad, God told Abraham to take him and go to the region of Moriah and sacrifice him there (Genesis 22:2). Abraham got up the next morning, saddled his donkey, took Isaac and went to Moriah. When Abraham was on the point of sacrificing Isaac, God stayed Abraham’s hand, and an angel called to Abraham, saying,

“I swear by myself
that because you have done this
and have not withheld your son,
your only son,
I will surely bless you
and make your descendants as numerous
as the stars in the sky
and as the sand on the seashore.”

Genesis 22:16a-17 NIV

The number of Abraham’s descendents was not very large during his lifetime, but by the time his descendants came out of the land of Egypt, hundreds of years later, the number had increased greatly (Deuteronomy 10:22).

CHILDREN OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Abraham’s descendants came to be known in the Old Testament not only as children of Abraham but also as children of God. God Himself

referred to Abraham's descendants as His own children. For example, God told Moses to say to Pharaoh,

“This is what the LORD says:
Israel is my firstborn son,
and I told you,
‘Let my son go, so he may worship me.’”

Exodus 4:22-23a NIV

Some of the laws that God gave to Moses were based on the fact that the descendants of Abraham were considered God's children. For example, God said,

“You are the children of the LORD your God.
Do not cut yourselves
or shave the front of your heads for the dead,
for you are a people holy to the LORD your God.
Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth,
the LORD has chosen you
to be his treasured possession.”

Deuteronomy 14:1-2 NIV

THE CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM COULD LOSE THEIR STATUS AS CHILDREN OF GOD

Although God claimed the descendants of Abraham as His own children, their continuing to be His children depended upon how they lived. God expected them to act like His children, otherwise they would lose their status. God told the prophet Jeremiah to speak to the descendants of Abraham and say,

“‘Cursed is the man who does not obey
the terms of this covenant--
the terms I commanded your forefathers
when I brought them out of Egypt,
out of the iron-smelting furnace.’
I said, ‘Obey me and do everything I command you,
and you will be my people,
and I will be your God.’”

Jeremiah 11:3b-4 NIV

God gave a name to one of the sons of the prophet Hosea that indicated that Abraham's descendants could lose their status. God said,

“Call him Lo-Ammi,
for you are not my people,
and I am not your God.”

Hosea 1:9 NIV

By naming the boy “Lo-Ammi” (which means ‘not my people’) God showed that He might cancel His relationship with Abraham's descendants, depending, of course, on the way they lived.

God also suggested to Hosea that others, who were not Abraham's physical descendants, might someday be included among God's children. God said,

“I will say to those called ‘Not my people,’
‘You are my people’;
and they will say,
‘You are my God.’”

Hosea 2:23 NIV

The Old Testament suggests that some of the Gentile people might someday be a part of God's children. This thought comes to fruition in the New Testament.

WHAT JOHN THE BAPTIST SAID ABOUT BEING ABRAHAM'S CHILDREN

Many people in the days of John the Baptist prided themselves on being Abraham's physical descendants, but John the Baptist tried to convince them that their being Abraham's children by birth was not the most important thing. John the Baptist said,

“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.
And do not think you can say to yourselves,
‘We have Abraham as our father.’
I tell you that out of these stones
God can raise up children for Abraham.”

Matthew 3:8-9 NIV

It was no credit to them that they were Abraham's physical descendants. They had done nothing to earn that distinction. Far more important for them was to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

WHAT JESUS SAID ABOUT BEING ABRAHAM'S CHILDREN

Jesus was a child of Abraham by birth and He, no doubt, appreciated the significance of it. Yet He did not boast about being Abraham's child. He noted that those that were boasting about being Abraham's children were not acting like one would expect Abraham's children to act. Instead, they were acting like the children of the devil.

"'If you were Abraham's children,'
said Jesus,
'then you would do the things Abraham did.
As it is, you are determined to kill me,
a man who has told you the truth
that I heard from God.
Abraham did not do such things.
You are doing the things your own father does.'"

John 8:39-40 NIV

The physical children of Abraham can act in a way that distances them from their father Abraham. They can be of Abraham's flesh without being of his spirit.

JESUS CHANGED THINGS

Jesus widened the category of those who might be considered God's children. The time had passed when the category encompassed only the physical descendants of Abraham. The apostle John maintained that everyone that received Jesus was given the right to become children of God. John said,

"'Yet to all who received him [Jesus],
to those who believed in his name,
he gave the right to become children of God.'"

John 1:12 NIV

This statement by the apostle John implies that also Gentiles can become children of God.

People sometimes make false assumptions regarding the identity of Abraham's true (spiritual) children, as the following illustrates.

PHYSICAL DESCENT DOES NOT GUARANTEE SPIRITUAL AFFINITY

Abraham had a lot of natural sons. In addition to Isaac (by Sarah), Abraham had Ishmael (by Hagar) and Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah (by Keturah) (1 Chronicles 1:32). This led the apostle Paul to observe,

“For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.”

Romans 9:6b NIV

Being a physical descendant of Abraham does not prove that a person has Abraham's heart and mind. The apostle Paul said,

“Nor because they are his [Abraham's] descendants are they all Abraham's children.

On the contrary,

‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’”

Romans 9:7 NIV

The conclusion that the apostle Paul drew from the fact that Abraham had children in addition to Isaac is:

“In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.”

Romans 9:8 NIV

We conclude, then, that it is not the natural children of Abraham who are automatically considered to be God's children. The reverse seems to be true, namely, God's children (of whatever lineage) are automatically considered to be Abraham's (spiritual) children.

This brings us back to the names that God gave to Hosea's children. Those names suggest that people who formerly were not God's people could become His people and that God would love those who formerly were not loved by Him. The apostle Paul said,

“As he [God] says in Hosea:
 ‘I will call them ‘my people’
 who are not my people;
 and I will call her ‘my loved one’
 who is not my loved one,
 and, ‘It will happen that in the very place
 where it was said to them,
 ‘You are not my people,’
 they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”

Romans 9:25-26 NIV

The apostle Paul quoted these words from Hosea to show that the Gentiles have a chance to become children of God (Romans 9:24).

CIRCUMCISION DOES NOT MAKE MEN ABRAHAM'S SPIRITUAL CHILDREN

The apostle Paul considered believing in Christ to be more important than being circumcised. He maintained that Abraham is the father of people who have not been circumcised, provided those people have faith in Jesus. Concerning this Paul said,

“So then, he [Abraham]
 is the father of all who believe
 but have not been circumcised,
 in order that righteousness
 might be credited to them.”

Romans 4:11b NIV

To support this contention, the apostle Paul called attention to the fact that righteousness was credited to Abraham before he was circumcised. Paul said,

“And he [Abraham] is also
 the father of the circumcised

who not only are circumcised
but who also walk in the footsteps of the
faith that our father Abraham had
before he was circumcised.”

Romans 4:12 NIV

KEEPING THE LAW OF MOSES DOES NOT MAKE PEOPLE CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM

Many of the physical descendants of Abraham in the days of the apostle Paul felt they could not be faithful children of Abraham unless they kept the Law of Moses. Even some of the Gentiles that believed in Jesus in those days felt that their wellbeing was tied to keeping the Law of Moses. Paul pointed out, however, that the blessings that were promised through Abraham were not tied to the Law of Moses. The apostle Paul claimed that the promised blessings had to come by faith. Paul said,

“Therefore,
the promise comes by faith,
so that it may be by grace
and may be guaranteed
to all Abraham’s offspring-
not only to those who are of the law
but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham.
He is the father of us all.”

Romans 4:16 NIV

If the promise of blessedness were tied to keeping the Law of Moses, it would not be on the basis of faith but on the basis of works, which means, as the apostle Paul pointed out, that it would not be “by grace.”

The blessings spoken to Abraham could not have been tied to the Law of Moses, because the Law of Moses had not been given at the time God blessed Abraham promised to bless all peoples through Him.

Further, the promise could not apply to all nations if it came by the Law of Moses, for the Law of Moses was not given to all nations but only to the physical descendants of Abraham.

WHO ARE THE TRUE DESCENDANTS OF ABRAHAM?

The apostle Paul maintained that those who believe in Jesus are the true, spiritual children of Abraham. He said,

“Understand, then, that
those who believe are children of Abraham.”

Galatians 3:7 NIV

Abraham must have realized that he would have spiritual children from among the Gentiles, for the apostle Paul said of him,

“The Scripture foresaw that
God would justify the Gentiles by faith,
and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham:
‘All nations will be blessed through you.’”

Galatians 3:8 NIV

Thus, the apostle Paul concluded,

“So those who have faith
are blessed along with Abraham,
the man of faith.”

Galatians 3:9 NIV

There can be no question but that those who believe in Jesus are blessed by it. Therefore, it can be appropriately said that they inherit a blessing and are, therefore, heirs of the promise to Abraham.

CHILDREN OF GOD

Followers of Christ, as spiritual children of Abraham, are also children of God. This is shown by what the apostle Paul wrote to those who followed Jesus in Galatia. He wrote,

“You are all sons of God
through faith in Christ Jesus.”

Galatians 3:26 NIV

The apostle Paul went on to affirm that all of the Galatian believers, many of whom were Gentiles, were sons of God. Paul's confidence in their being sons of God was based on the fact that they had all been clothed in Christ when they were baptized into Him. He said,

“For all of you
who were baptized into Christ
have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

Galatians 3:27 NIV

The opportunity to get into Christ (by being baptized into Him) is available to people of all races, all stations in life, and both sexes. Thus the apostle Paul said,

“There is neither Jew nor Greek,
slave nor free, male nor female,
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Galatians 3:28 NIV

The apostle Paul concluded, therefore,

“If you belong to Christ,
then you are Abraham's seed,
and heirs according to the promise.”

Galatians 3:29 NIV

This passage equates being of “Abraham's seed” (Galatians 3:29) with being “sons of God” (Galatians 3:26). In Christ, the dichotomy between children of Abraham and children of God disappears. They are the same in Christ. So, everyone who belongs to Christ is in Abraham's spiritual family and is a rightful heir of the promise to Abraham.

TO WHOM DOES GOD GIVE HIS HOLY SPIRIT AS A SEAL OF SONSHIP

All that has been written above about the identity of Abraham's true children would, perhaps, seem speculative and inconclusive, except for the fact that God puts His stamp of approval on those who are His children. He does this by giving His Holy Spirit to them. The apostle Paul said,

“Because you are sons,

God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts,
the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'
So you are no longer a slave,
but a son;
and since you are a son,
God has made you also an heir."

Galatians 4:6-7 NIV

The only way for Abraham's physical children to gain membership in Abraham's spiritual family is through Jesus Christ. Abraham's physical children become his spiritual children the same way that Gentiles do. They become his children through faith in Jesus and by obedience to Him.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. Can people be Abraham's spiritual children without being his physical children? Please explain.
2. Was the faith that Abraham had in any way similar to the faith that believers in Jesus have? If so, in what way (or ways) was Abraham's faith similar to the faith of those who believe in Jesus?
3. What are some of the blessings that come from believing in Jesus?
4. How does a person become a son of God? See Galatians 3:26-27.
5. Are women who believe in Jesus also considered as "sons of God?" Please elaborate.
6. Is there any advantage in being considered a "son of God?" If so, what is the advantage of it?