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“GOD OF ABRAHAM”

This chapter tells the story of how God came to be referred to as “the God of Abraham.”

People have known about God from the beginning, for God revealed Himself to them (Romans 1:19). He even carried on a conversation with them (Genesis 3:9-19).

Adam, the first man, lived a long time and he and Eve had many sons and daughters (Genesis 5:3-7). Before many generations had passed, however, Adam and Eve’s descendants forgot about God. They fell into gross sins and mankind, for that reason, was all but wiped from the face of the earth in the great flood. Only Noah and his family were saved (Genesis 7:7,13). They were spared, because Noah was a righteous man.

Also among Noah’s descendants the knowledge of God did not persist for long. Within a few generations the knowledge of God was again all but lost. Some people may have retained a little knowledge of Him, but few of them appear to have worshipped Him exclusively. The book of Romans says,

“For although they knew God,
they neither glorified him as God
nor gave thanks to him,
but their thinking became futile
and their foolish hearts were darkened.
Although they claimed to be wise,
they became fools
and exchanged the glory of the immortal God
for images made to look like mortal man
and birds and animals and reptiles.”

Romans 1:21-23 NIV

ABRAHAM IMPRESSED GOD

In spite of mankind’s waywardness, one man stood out amidst the darkness. His name was Abram, the son of Terah. Abram lived at the city of Ur, near the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in a land that is known today as Iraq.

No one knows when Abram first heard about God. The people at Ur may have told stories to young Abram about Adam and Eve. They may

have even told him about Abel, who offered a better sacrifice than Cain, and about Enoch, who walked with God, and about Noah, a righteous man who built a wonderful boat. In addition to these stories, the people at Ur may have told him about the marvelous tower that the people of Babylon built not many miles away from where Abram lived. Parts of the tower of Babel may have even been still standing in Abram’s day.

So when God appeared to Abram and told him to leave Ur and go to a land that He would show him, Abram was attentive to what God said (Acts 7:2-3). Terah was also attentive to what God said to Abram, so much so that he left Ur, taking along with him Abram and Abram’s wife Sarai and Lot Abram’s nephew (Genesis 11:31).

They traveled north along the Euphrates river until they came to a place called Haran, where God allowed Abram to remain until Terah had died (Acts 7:4).

Abram stayed at Haran until God finally said to him,

“Leave your country,
your people and your father’s household
and go to the land I will show you.”

Genesis 12:1 NIV

At that time, God made promises to Abram. God said,

“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.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Genesis 12:2-3 NIV

ABRAM WENT TO THE LAND OF CANAAN

Abram was 75 years old when God told him to leave Haran. Following God’s command, he took Sarai and Lot and all the servants and the cattle that God had given him and left Haran (Genesis 12:4-5). He traveled east and south and came into a land that was occupied by the Canaanites.

When Abram got to a place called Shechem, God appeared to him and said to him,

“To your offspring I will give this land.”

Genesis 12:7 NIV

At Shechem Abram built an altar to God (Genesis 12:7). This is the first mention that the Bible makes of Abraham’s having built an altar.

From Shechem, Abram went a little further south. He went to the hills east of Bethel. There, between Bethel and Ai, he built another altar. At that place, Abram “called on the name of the Lord” (Genesis 12:8). This is the first mention that the Bible makes of Abram’s calling on God. From that place, Abram traveled further south and came to the Negev.

ABRAM’S BIG MISTAKE

Out of his desire to take care of his people and animals and to shield them from famine, Abram made a big mistake. He forsook (albeit temporarily) the land into which God had led him and went down to Egypt to find food. However, things did not turn out well for Abram in Egypt, for he nearly lost his wife there. Pharaoh took Sarai and would have kept her as his own wife had he not found out that Abram had deceived him and that Sarai was actually Abram’s wife. So Pharaoh returned Sarai to Abram and expelled him from Egypt in disgrace. God brought Abram and his family back into the Land of Canaan.

Abram wandered about in the Negev for a time. Then he went back to the place between Bethel and Ai where he had previously built an altar. There he again “called on the name of the Lord” (Genesis 13:4). His desire to communicate with God appears to have been growing, as well as his awareness of his need for God’s help.

GOD EMPHASIZED THE GREATNESS OF THE PROMISE

In his dealings with his nephew Lot, Abram revealed the type of spirit that was in him. He and Lot separated from each other and Abram allowed Lot to take the most fertile part of the land for his herds. After Abram had separated himself from Lot, God spoke to Abram and said,

“Lift up your eyes from where you are
and look north and south, east and west.
All the land that you see I will give to you

and your offspring forever.
I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth,
so that if anyone could count the dust,
then your offspring could be counted.”

Genesis 13:14-16 NIV

Then God said to Abram,

“Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land,
for I am giving it to you.”

Genesis 13:17 NIV

Following this event, Abram moved his tents to Hebron, near the great trees of Mamre where he built another altar to God (Genesis 13:18). It seems that Abram’s sense of his need for God was still growing.

ABRAM RESCUED LOT AND WAS BLESSED BY MELCHIZEDEK

Lot’s decision to live at Sodom was a disaster for him. Four kings went to war against the king of Sodom and Lot was taken captive, but Abram rescued him. As Abram was returning from rescuing Lot, Melchizedek, king of Salem, who was also a “priest of God Most High,” came out to meet Abram (Genesis 14:18) and blessed him, saying,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth.
And blessed be God Most High,
who delivered your enemies into your hand.”

Genesis 14:19-20 NIV

Melchizedek’s words illustrate that the knowledge of God was not entirely lost from the earth. Melchizedek knew that it was through God’s help that Abram had been able to win a great victory. This indicated to Melchizedek how important Abram was. Melchizedek blessed Abram and in response to his blessing, Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils he had taken in battle.

GOD’S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

The word of God came to Abram in a vision, and God said to him,

“Do not be afraid, Abram.
I am your shield, your very great reward.”

Genesis 15:1b NIV

Abram complained to God that he was still childless. Then God took Abram outside under the open sky and said to him,

“Look up at the heavens and count the stars—
if indeed you can count them.”

Genesis 15:5a NIV

Then God said to him,

“So shall your offspring be.”

Genesis 15:5b NIV

At this point the Bible says something very remarkable about Abram. It says that Abram “believed” God and that God “credited” Abram’s faith to Abram “as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).

On that very day God made a covenant with Abram to the effect that He would give the land of Canaan to him and his descendants (Genesis 15:18-21).

GOD CONFIRMED THE COVENANT WITH ABRAM

When Abram was 99 years old, God appeared to him again and confirmed the covenant that He had made with him. God said,

“I am God Almighty;
walk before me and be blameless.
I will confirm my covenant between me and you
and will greatly increase your numbers.”

Genesis 17:1b-2 NIV

It was then that God changed Abram’s name to “Abraham,” which means, “father of many people” (Genesis 17:5). God also changed Sarai’s name to “Sarah” (Genesis 17:15), which means “princess.” It was also at that time that God instructed Abraham about circumcision (Genesis 17:10-14). Circumcision became a part of God’s covenant with Abraham.

GOD BECAME KNOWN AS THE “GOD OF ABRAHAM”

Abraham became increasingly devoted to God. So much so, that it became widely known in the land that Abraham worshipped God, and God only. In fact, Abraham’s devotion to God was so well known that in the minds of many people God was identified as being “the God of Abraham.”

For example, when Abraham’s servant went to Haran to find a wife for Abraham’s son Isaac, the servant addressed God in prayer as, “God of my master Abraham” (Genesis 24:12). When the servant encountered Rebekah, he praised God as the “God of my master Abraham” (Genesis 24:27). In relating his story to Rebekah’s relatives, Abraham’s servant again referred to God as “the God of my master Abraham” (Genesis 24:42,48).

Later, when God appeared to Isaac at Beersheba, He identified Himself to Isaac as the “God of your father Abraham” (Genesis 26:24).

When Isaac’s son Jacob was an old man and was blessing his son Joseph, he referred to God as the “God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked” (Genesis 48:15).

Still much later, when God revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush, God identified himself as the “God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6). Jesus referred to this incident.

“GOD OF ABRAHAM” IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

There was a group of people in the days of Jesus called the “Sadducees.” They did not believe that there would be a resurrection of the dead, yet they knew that Jesus did believe in the resurrection. So they came to Jesus with a question. They reminded Jesus that Moses had said that if a man dies, leaving no children, his brother should marry the man’s widow.

Then they told Jesus of a certain family of seven brothers. The first one married and he died leaving no children. So the second brother married the widow, but the second brother also died leaving no children. Finally, all the brothers had married the woman and had died. Their question was, “At the resurrection, whose wife will she be?” Jesus replied,

“You are in error
because you do not know the Scriptures
or the power of God”

Matthew 22:29 NIV

Jesus explained,

“At the resurrection
people will neither marry
nor be given in marriage;
they will be like the angels in heaven.”

Matthew 22:30 NIV

Continuing this thought Jesus said to the Sadducees,

“But about the resurrection of the dead—
have you not read what God said to you,
‘I am the God of Abraham,
the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’?”

Matthew 22:31-32a NIV

Jesus concluded the discussion by saying,

“He is not the God of the dead
but of the living.”

Matthew 22:32b NIV

Jesus saw a meaning in the words that God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, which the Sadducees had not seen. The way that God spoke of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob indicated that were still living, not dead.

WHAT THE APOSTLE PETER SAID ABOUT THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND JACOB

If Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are truly living, this goes a long way to substantiate the likelihood of there being a resurrection. The likelihood was proven to be a reality when Jesus was raised from the dead. The apostle Peter said to the people of Jerusalem,

“The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
the God of our fathers,
has glorified his servant Jesus.”

Acts 3:13a NIV

Then the apostle Peter went on to explain that God had “glorified” Jesus by raising Him from he dead. Peter said,

“You killed the author of life,

but God raised him from the dead.
We are witnesses of this.”

Acts 3:15 NIV

THE FRIEND OF GOD

The affection that Abraham had for God was not one-sided. God also had affection for Abraham. God spoke of him as, “Abraham my friend” (Isaiah 41:8; 2 Chronicles 20:7). It is remarkable that the Creator of the universe would call a human being His friend.

The book of James says of Abraham,

“Abraham believed God,
and it was credited to him as righteousness,
and he was called God’s friend.”

James 2:23b NIV

All of this helps us understand how the writer of the book of Hebrews could say that God was not ashamed to be known as the “God of Abraham.” In speaking of Abraham and Sarah, the writer of the book of Hebrews said,

“They were longing for a better country—
a heavenly one.
Therefore God is not ashamed
to be called their God,
for he has prepared a city for them.”

Hebrews 11:16 NIV

This was a high honor that was bestowed upon Abraham: God was willing to allow Abraham’s name to be attached to His.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. Why did so many people in the old days forget about God? What do you suppose the reason for that was?
2. Why have so many people in recent years turned away from God? What do you think the reason for this is?

3. What are some of the personal characteristics that God may have admired in Abraham?
4. What has God done to restore the knowledge of Himself in the minds of people? Did Jesus have a role in this? What was Jesus' role?
5. How can faith in God be restored in the minds of people today? What can be done?
6. Does God admire the same characteristics in people today that He admired in Abraham? How can people acquire those characteristics?
7. Can a person become a “friend of God” today? If so, how?