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FAITH OF ABRAHAM

Abraham is known as a man of faith, and this is a study of what his faith was like.

Abraham knew that God existed because God appeared to him (Acts 7:2-3); yet his faith was more than an acceptance of the existence of God. His acceptance of the fact of God's existence was only the first step in his journey toward complete faith in God.

GOD PUT ABRAHAM TO THE TEST

God began putting Abraham to the test from the very start. Early on, God said to him,

“Leave your country
and your people and go to the land
I will show you.”

Acts 7:3 NIV

ABRAHAM FACED DIFFICULT DECISIONS

Abraham had a wife to take care of, plus an aged father and a young nephew. He may have asked himself, “Did God really appear to me?” “Can I trust what God said to me?” “If I leave Ur, will God really take care of me?” “How will I support my family?”

In the end, however, Abraham decided to leave Ur. Such a decision required faith on his part. So, his faith was not something that came to him in a blinding flash late in life. Rather, it was something that he exhibited in some measure from the very beginning of his relationship with God.

ABRAHAM'S FAITH, AS DESCRIBED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament has a lot to say about Abraham and his faith. The New Testament has more to say about Abraham's faith than the Old Testament does. The Old Testament tells the story of what Abraham did, while the New Testament gives the meaning of it all. The New Testament says concerning Abraham's decision to leave Ur,

“By faith Abraham,
when called to go to a place
he would later receive as his inheritance,
obeyed and went,
even though he did not know
where he was going.”

Hebrews 11:8 NIV

WALKING BY FAITH IS NOT EASY

Once Abraham had decided to leave Ur, he had many preparations to make: He had to get his travelling gear together. He had to decide which animals to take. He had to dispose of any property that he could not take along.

Imagine what Abraham may have said to Sarah, his wife. Did he explain to her who God is? Did he tell her what God had said? Did he quell any fears she may have had about the dangers of the trip?

Imagine the problems that Abraham faced in explaining to his friends and relatives why he was leaving. They were puzzled, no doubt, that he would leave a civilized place like Ur and go to some less civilized place. Did they laugh at his supposed folly?

Abraham also faced the dilemma of what to do about Terah, his father. Should he take him along or leave him behind? Terah

may have solved Abraham's dilemma by deciding on his own to go and take Abraham along. The book of Genesis says,

“Terah took his son Abram,
his grandson Lot son of Haran,
and his daughter-in-law Sarai,
the wife of his son Abram,
and together they set out
from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan.
But when they came to Haran, they settled there.”
Genesis 11:31 NIV

THE TRIP NORTH

Travel in Abraham's day was slow and dangerous at best. People rode on animals or in carts or traveled on foot. Wild animals sometimes had to be warded off, and bandits were a constant threat. Yet in spite of the arduous nature of the trip and its dangers, Abraham and his little band set out, going north along the Euphrates River. They trusted in God to help and protect them.

When Abraham's band finally arrived at Haran, after having traveled hundreds of miles, they must have been exhausted from their trip. As Abraham looked around at Haran, he may have asked himself, “Is this the place where God wants me to be?”

Abraham waited patiently in Haran for many years, until God told him to leave; but when God finally told him to leave Haran, he left. The book of Genesis says,

“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.”

Genesis 12:4 NIV

God led Abraham into the land of Canaan. The book of Genesis says,

“He [Abram] 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.”

Genesis 12:5 NIV

THE LAND OF CANAAN

Abraham found many people living in the land of Canaan. He also found many walled and fortified cities. It was a dangerous for a pilgrim to wander from place to place. Abraham, however, did not complain about his being exposed and defenseless in a foreign land. His faith led him to trust God to protect him.

In Canaan, Abraham was an outsider, an interloper, a foreigner, yet he bore the ignominy of it with grace. The book of Hebrews says regarding Abraham,

“By faith he
made his home in the promised land
like a stranger in a foreign country;
he lived in tents,
as did Isaac and Jacob,
who were heirs with him of the same promise.”

Hebrews 11:9 NIV

It was good, no doubt, that Abraham did not live in any of the Canaanite cities, for the people in those cities worshipped gods in which Abraham did not believe. His not living in those cities saved him from being tempted to go through the polite formality of worshipping those people's gods in order to get along with them.

There is no record that Abraham ever compromised his faith by worshipping pagan gods.

Only after Abraham had demonstrated his faith by leaving both Ur and Haran, and by coming into the Land of Canaan, do we find the Bible saying of him,

“Abram believed the LORD,
and he [God] credited it to him as righteousness.”
Genesis 15:6 NIV

ABRAHAM LIVED IN HOPE

In time, Abraham became aware that he was getting older and had no suitable heir. Nonetheless, he demonstrated his faith by continuing to live in hope. The apostle Paul said of Abraham,

“Against all hope,
Abraham in hope believed
and so became the father of many nations,
just as it had been said to him,
‘So shall your offspring be.’”
Romans 4:18 NIV

Abraham did not stop trusting that God would give him an heir. The apostle Paul said of him,

“Without weakening in his faith,
he faced the fact that his body
was as good as dead
--since he was about a hundred years old—
and that Sarah’s womb was also dead.”
Romans 4:19 NIV

The reason Abraham did not weaken in faith is that he felt that God was able to do anything He wanted to do. The Apostle Paul said of Abraham,

“Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.”

Romans 4:20-21 NIV

FINALLY, ISAAC WAS BORN

Abraham and Sarah’s faith was finally rewarded with the birth of Isaac. The book of Hebrews says,

“By faith Abraham, even though he was past age --and Sarah herself was barren— was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.”

Hebrews 11:11 NIV

So we see that great things can come from faith. This was true in the case of Abraham and Sarah. The book of Hebrews says,

“And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky

and as countless as the sand on the seashore.”

Hebrews 11:12 NIV

THE GREATEST TEST OF ABRAHAM’S FAITH

The greatest test of Abraham’s faith came when God told him to sacrifice his son Isaac on an altar (Hebrews 11:17-18). God apparently wanted to see how much faith Abraham had. He did this by putting Abraham in a tight spot and getting him out. God did not get Abraham out of the tight spot in the way that Abraham thought He would. Abraham thought God would raise Isaac up from the dead after he had sacrificed him. This shows how great Abraham’s faith was. The book of Hebrews says,

“Abraham reasoned
that God could raise the dead,
and figuratively speaking,
he did receive Isaac back from death.”

Hebrews 11:19 NIV

What God did, however, was far kinder than what Abraham had supposed God would do. He stopped Abraham’s hand before he could harm Isaac.

It is important for us to note that it was not until Abraham had shown his willingness to obey God--even to the point of sacrificing his son by Sarah--that Abraham’s faith was considered to be “complete.” The book of James says,

“You see that his faith
and his actions were working together,
and his faith was made complete
by what he did.”

James 2:22 NIV

The word “complete” is used to describe something that has reached its proper (or intended) end. Had Abraham not been willing to give up his beloved son Isaac in the service of God, his faith would not have reached its intended end. It would have been incomplete. Although Abraham had often demonstrated a good measure of faith prior to this, it was not until he was willing to sacrifice Isaac that God finally considered Abraham’s faith to be complete enough to count him a righteous person.

In speaking about Abraham’s sacrifice, The book of James says,

And the scripture was fulfilled that says,
‘Abraham believed God,
and it was credited to him as righteousness,’
and he was called God’s friend.”

James 2:23 NIV

After James had made this statement, James made an observation that should serve as a corrective for much of contemporary thinking about faith. James said,

“You see that a person is justified
by what he does and not by faith alone.”

James 2:24 NIV

This observation is one of the most overlooked passages in the whole Bible. Many theologians do not like it. Many people just ignore it. The New Testament teaches (what the Old Testament also shows) that Abraham’s faith did not consist only in His believing in God’s existence, or even in his trusting in God to save him. It was Abraham’s doing what God said for him to do that completed his faith. His faith had to be completed this way, otherwise it would have been a dead faith (James 2:26). For faith to be living it must be completed in obedience. If a person’s faith is

not completed in obedience, it will not have its transforming effect upon that person's heart and life. It will not lead to righteousness.

SUMMING UP

We observe that Abraham believed certain facts about God to be true. We also observe that he trusted in God and that he hoped in God. Further, we observe that his faith was not completed until he had put his faith into action. All of these components of faith are essential. If Abraham had lacked any one of them, he would not have become the father of the faithful.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. Do you suppose that Sarah left her home at Ur willingly? What makes you think as you do about Sarah?
2. What do you suppose Abraham could have said to the people at Ur to explain why he was leaving them?
3. Have you ever lived in a tent? What is it like to live in a tent? Do you think you would enjoy it?
4. If Abraham had not been willing to do what God said for him to do, would God have blessed Abraham as He did? What conclusions can you draw from Abraham's experience with God?
5. Do you see any parallels between what Abraham was called to do and what believers in Jesus are called upon to do? If so, please explain.
6. How can a person make his or her faith "complete?" See James 2:22.