

“Father Abraham”
Sermon Series on *A Faithful God for a Fallen People #1*
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(Gen. 11:26-32)

Today we begin a new series of sermons which will take us through the summer months in which we’ll be studying the lives of some of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Old Testament in the book of Genesis – Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah and Rachel. For the next 14 weeks we’ll study the ways in which God demonstrated His faithfulness over and over again to one particular family.

Many people think that the Bible is filled with stories of individuals who were spiritual giants and had it all together. However, as we’ll see in our study this summer, the people in the Bible who followed God in the past were folks just like you and me. They were individuals who were filled with strengths and weaknesses, faith and doubt. They sometimes got it right, but often they missed the mark all together and messed things up in profound and damaging ways. But through it all God was faithful in calling to Himself a people who would one day be a blessing to the whole world and through whom He would eventually send His Son the Messiah – Jesus.

The Lord is indeed a faithful God for a fallen people. That was true then, and it’s still true today. This morning we begin our study by taking a look at the life of Father Abraham.

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James Montgomery Boice, the long-time pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, once said¹ that with the exception of Jesus Christ, Abraham is probably the most important person in the Bible. One indication of this is the amount of space that’s given to him. Although only 11 chapters of the book of Genesis are devoted to the entire history of the world before Abraham was born (a period of at least 19 generations!), 14 chapters are used to tell about the life of this one man. The history of Abraham and his immediate descendants fills the great middle portion of the book of Genesis, and their story extends from the end of chapter 11 all the way through chapter 36. It’s pretty remarkable that one man and his family should be given this much ink and attention.

Abraham (or Abram as he is first called in Scripture here – later on God changed his name to Abraham) was a person of faith, and it’s for this reason that he’s considered a spiritual giant in Scripture. Moses was the great lawgiver.

Joshua was a great military leader. David was Israel's greatest king, and he helped raise the nation to its strongest position of political power in the ancient Near East. Daniel was an outstanding statesperson, and Elijah was one of the greatest prophets.

Each of these people was legendary in their own right. But each of them would have said in an instant that Abraham was their father in the faith. This was also true of people in the New Testament. For example, the apostle Paul in particular looked back to Abraham as the greatest of all the examples of how God's people are justified by faith, and that we are all called to live by faith.

In the early chapters of Genesis we're told that God made a promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. That promise was fulfilled both physically and spiritually. On the physical side, Abraham became the father of the Jewish people through his son Isaac, and it was from this lineage that the Messiah eventually came. Abraham also became the father of many of the Arab tribes in the Middle East through his son Ishmael. And on the spiritual side of things, the Bible says that Abraham is the spiritual father of anyone who has ever professed faith in Jesus Christ. We're his spiritual descendants. Abraham truly is our spiritual father.

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James Boice says that you can't understand the Old Testament without understanding Abraham, because in many ways the story of redemption begins with him. The record of Abraham's life contains the first mention in the Bible of God's righteousness (Gen. 15). In addition, Matthew begins his gospel with the genealogy of Jesus in order to trace the beginnings of salvation all the way back to Abraham. And in Luke's gospel Zechariah makes a declaration that Jesus' birth was the fulfillment of God's promise to the patriarch (Lk. 1:68,72-73). It seems that almost every writer in the NT points back to this man of faith.

Many passages in the New Testament explain the significance of Abraham. For example, in order to support the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, an entire chapter in the book of Romans refers to God's dealing with the patriarch. Two chapters in the book of Galatians refer to Abraham's life in order to prove that salvation is given to people apart from any good works they may do. And one of the longest paragraphs in the whole Bible (Hebrews 11) is devoted to the development of faith in the life Abraham.

Three times we read in Scripture that Abraham is called "the friend of God" (2 Chron. 20:7; Is. 41:8; and Jms. 2:23). Why is Abraham in particular singled out as God's friend? It's because Abraham believed God, and the Lord empowered him to live a life that was characterized by faith. That's how you and I can become friends with God too.

After an introduction like this, it might come as a bit of a shock to learn that there was really nothing special in Abraham himself that commended the patriarch to God. It isn't as though Abraham always demonstrated great all the time or he was a person who had it all together in every situation. In fact, as we'll see in the study of his life, Abraham doubted the Lord on many occasions, and he messed up more than once. Far from being a model of faith on all occasions, Abraham is often a faltering example of a person who tries to follow God and take Him at His word, but who struggles to do it every step of the way. It sounds a lot like you and me.

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The story of Abraham begins about 2,100 years before the birth of Christ, and we find it recorded in the passage we've read this morning at the end of Genesis 11. After the account of the tower of Babel is told and the scattering of humanity and the diffusion of languages, the author lists a genealogy in Genesis 11 that traces one particular family over 19 generations. We're told that Shem, who was one of the sons of Noah, had a son of his own two years after the flood. And this son also had children, who had children, who had more children. And so it went for 19 generations until a man named Terah was born.

Terah had three sons of his own, and their names were Abram, Nahor and Haran. Haran died while the family was still living in the city of Ur in an area called Mesopotamia, and this left his son Lot an orphan. It appears that Terah took his grandson Lot into his home, and he raised the boy as his own. Later on, Terah decided to leave Ur, which is located in modern day Iraq, and the family intended to move to the region of Canaan, which is located in modern day Palestine. And the Bible says that he took with him Abram and his wife Sarai (whose name later was changed to Sarah) along with his grandson Lot.

Why didn't Terah's second son Nahor accompany the family to go to Canaan? It's a mystery, and we aren't told the reason why. What we do know is that the family traveled north and west until they came to the city of Haran, which is located in modern day Turkey. And it was there in Haran that they settled. Originally the plan was to go to Canaan, but for some reason they stopped in Haran. Again, we don't know why. And there in Haran we're told that Terah died, leaving Abram to take care of his nephew Lot.

Why didn't the family go to Canaan as they originally planned? Why did they settle in Haran? Maybe the journey was just too difficult. Perhaps they lost a few camels along the way that were carrying all their worldly belongings, and they decided to stop. It might have been that Lot was a whiny sort of kid, and he complained all the time saying, "Are we there yet, grandpa?" For whatever reason, the family never got to their original destination, and they settled for something else.

When have you settled in your life and not gone all the way with what God wanted you to do? How did you cut short the plans you made and you settled for some else, something less? What does God want you to do about it now, and is it too late for you to complete the task or to make the journey? Perhaps the Lord is speaking to you today through this story about Abraham. God doesn't want you to settle. He wants you to go on all the way and complete the task and finish the course.

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From the simple beginnings of Abraham's story we discover that there wasn't anything that was particularly remarkable about the man. There is nothing in the account that would signal to us that he would become a great person of faith. Abraham came from an ordinary family that had an ordinary family tree. But God chose to something extraordinary in and through this man, and eventually Abraham would leave a legacy of faith that has reverberated throughout the centuries. We're studying his life today as evidence of that truth.

I close with this. Curtis Strange is one of the greatest golfers of all time. He was a member of the Wake Forest golf team which included Jay Haas and Bob Byman that won a National Championship back in 1974. Among the 17 PGA tour victories Curtis won, two of them were the U.S. Open, which he won back-to-back in the late 1980s. The only other golfer in history to win the U.S. Open in back-to-back years was Ben Hogan.

In 1988 when Curtis was playing in the Master's golf Tournament, he teed up his ball on the famous 12th hole. It's a difficult par 3, and many a championship has been lost on the 12th hold at the Master's. Curtis hit a beautiful shot, and it rolled right up and dropped into the cup for a hole-in-one. It's one of only three holes-in-one that have ever been shot on the 12th hole in the history of the Master's. The crowd went crazy with applause. Everyone was cheering. Then Curtis did an interesting thing. He leaned down, reached into the cup, picked up the ball and tossed it into Rae's Creek.

Now the media went crazy. After the round was over, with cameras on him and microphones in his face, the reporters asked, "Why in the world did you do that? Why didn't you keep the ball? You could have left it to your children or your grandchildren," they said. I love his response. Curtis replied, "I certainly hope that when I'm gone I have something better than a golf ball to leave to my grandchildren."

It's called a legacy. Webster defines a legacy as "an inheritance, something that is a gift from the past." What kind of spiritual legacy do you have to leave to your children and your grandchildren? How are you cultivating a life of faith which your descendants can emulate? We're talking about Father Abraham here today

because of the spiritual legacy he left us many years ago. How are you leaving a legacy yourself for others? Thanks be to the Lord that He is a faithful God for a fallen people which can enable us to leave a legacy to the next generation. Amen.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: Vol. 2 A New Beginning*, pp. 435ff.