

FATHER ABRAHAM, OUR MODEL OF FAITH

Our text is the Old Testament Lesson assigned to this day. From Genesis chapter 12 we listen to verses 2 & 3, God's promises to Abraham:

² "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. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Dear Friends in Christ,

Five times a day, devout members of the Muslim religion kneel down in prayer facing the direction of Mecca, a city in Saudi Arabia. Why Mecca? Mecca is the Holy City for the Islamic faithful because it is in Mecca that the Sacred Mosque is located. The Sacred Mosque is in the news this week because a construction crane collapsed on one portion of it, killing over 100 people. The Sacred Mosque is actually a number of elaborately decorated buildings built around a large, central courtyard. There, in the center of the courtyard of the Sacred Mosque is the religious focal point, the holy of holies, for all Muslims. There in the courtyard is a 50 ' high cube-like building called the Kaaba. The Kaaba, the whole building, is covered with a huge, heavy, richly embroidered black tapestry. The doors to the Kaaba are made of gold.

The Kaaba covers a spot sacred to the Muslims, the site of a religious shrine. Now, you may think that the shrine was built by the Prophet Mohammed, the founder of Islam who died in the year 632 A.D. But no, the shrine was not built by Mohammed, the shrine is said to have been built 2,500 years before Mohammed by none other than Abraham. That's right, the Abraham we know from Genesis, that Abraham is honored by the followers of the Islam religion as a prophet and the revered ancestor of their great prophet, Mohammed. Yes, over 1.7 billion Muslims in the world today refer to the Abraham of the Bible as "Father Abraham."

In the Jewish religion there is perhaps no figure who is honored or esteemed as highly as Abraham. Abraham is the physical ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel. He was the father of Isaac, the grandfather of Jacob and Esau and the great-grandfather of Joseph and his 11 brothers. Abraham is called the Ancestor of the Chosen Nation, the Father of the Jewish people.

In the New Testament Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul says to you and me, Gentile believers in Christ, that Abraham is the Father of those who believe in Jesus, the Father of the Faithful. You and I can rightly call him Father Abraham, too.

I. The Background

Just think of it. For 4,000 years Abraham has occupied a significant place in the world's religions and cultures. Three major religions, three diverse cultures, over 4 billion people (56% of the world's population) call this man Father Abraham. What is so special about this man Abraham? He's been esteemed and revered for so many years by so many people, he must've come from a special, pious

and blessed family. Well, no. Joshua, the successor to Moses as leader of Israel, tells us about Abraham's background. *Joshua said to all the people, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods.'*" (Joshua 24:2 NIV).

Abraham came from the city of Ur, and from a family of idol worshipers, persistent idol worshipers. Many years later, Abraham's grandson Jacob discovered that his father-in-law Laban (who was Abraham's great-nephew) was still involved with idol worship. (Genesis 31:19ff). When God called Abraham, Abraham had no special moral qualities that drew God to him. He was just like the majority of the world at that time. He lived in a family of unbelievers who denied the true God. Interesting to note, at that time in history, there were believers and worshipers of the true God. (Genesis 14). God could have easily chosen one of them, a believer, to be the Father of Believers. But instead, while Abraham was living among heathens, *the Lord said to Abraham, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."*

Doesn't this give you a sense of relief? When you compare your background to Abraham's, you also don't have any special pious lineage. God says that you were nothing but a poor, miserable sinner, *"inclined to evil from youth."* (Genesis 8:21). If Abraham had some sort of royal heritage or great moral virtue that drew God to him, we would then feel an immediate pressure to be something special in God's sight. We would wonder to ourselves, "how good do I have to be for God to choose me?" But God rules out any worthiness by choosing Abraham - from an idol worshiping family - to be the Father of Believers. And look at WHEN God chose Abram - before he had taken one step toward the land of Canaan - before he had issued one prayer to the true God. God's choice of Abraham shows that God is a Savior of sinners - that his love is purely a gift of His grace! Ephesians 1:4 says that God chose us before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. God chose us before we did one work - good or bad - long before we were ever born. This rules out any boasting on our part.

II. The call

The second thing that is interesting and comforting is the WAY in which God called Abraham. Notice there were no threats leveled at Abraham. There were no challenges, "I challenge you to go to the Promised Land." There were no emotional dramas or high pressure tactics. All you see are promises, promises, and more promises, seven promises at this point. 1) *"I will make you into a great nation and 2) I will bless you; 3) I will make your name great, and 4) you will be a blessing. 5) I will bless those who bless you, and 6) whoever curses you I will curse; and 7) all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* God made even more promises to Abraham later in his life.

You see why Abraham is revered and esteemed by so many people for so many years? That is the fulfillment of just one of God's promises, *"I will make your name great."* Abraham brought blessings on many people because the Lord's hand and the Lord's favor were with him wherever he went. And if these physical promises were not enough, God promised that *"all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*

At this point, Abraham would have known that God was talking about something more than just himself. This was an obvious restatement of the promise made to Eve - that a Savior would be born into the

world. Now God was narrowing the promise down to the family of Abraham. It would be one of Abraham's offspring who would save the world from sin.

It was through these promises then, that God converted Abraham from an unbeliever into a believer in the Christ to come. He changed Abraham's heart from thinking of god as a lifeless piece of stone, who only demanded blood and sacrifice, into a living God who wanted to GIVE Abraham his best! Imagine, for instance, if Donald Trump came up to you today and said, "I'll give you fifty million dollars a year to work for me. You'll get weekends off, a new car, a perfect health plan and a great pension." Who wouldn't want to take that offer? In the same way, when the living and powerful God appeared to Abraham and said, "your name will be great, you will be a blessing to everyone you run into, and the Savior will come through your offspring," what else could he do - say, "no thanks - I'd rather worship this piece of stone over here." With the Holy Spirit working through these promises, God was able to change Abraham's heart. He didn't have to offer any threats.

God has used the same method throughout the ages. Think of the jailer at Philippi. (Acts 16:16-34). Here this pagan Roman had locked the apostles up in the inner cell of the prison and fastened their feet in stocks. But what did the disciples do? They sang praises to God! And when all the inmates were set free by an earthquake, and the jailer came in quaking in his boots - what did the disciples do for him? They said, "*believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household!*" (Acts 16:31 NIV). They laid no demands upon this poor shaken man. They simply gave him the good news that Jesus Christ had died for his sins. And it was this sweet message of the gospel that transformed him. How could he not love such a God who had forgiven him and died for him?

And that's the way God worked with you. He didn't get you in a headlock, give you a tight squeeze, and say, "you better become a Christian or I'm gonna make it tough for you!" No. He took the gentle and cleansing waters of baptism, and poured them over your head. And through that gospel promise of forgiveness and cleansing, God changed your heart from heathen to holy in the flash of a second. Early on, when you found yourself rebelling against what God had made you in your younger years, God made no demands of you. Instead, he held out his nail-marked hands and said, "I died for you. I want you back." It's that eternal promise of full and complete forgiveness that keeps us coming back to worship him. When you hear the absolution spoken by the pastor, "by the command of our Lord I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," or when you hear the blessing at the end of the service, nothing could sound sweeter. It's those promises that keep us coming back again and again after all of our failures throughout the week.

Imagine what a terrible religion we would have without this kind of a conversion. Whenever anyone loses the gospel, they almost always have to work by force. The Inquisition by the Catholic Church hundreds of years ago is a glaring example. The Mohammedan conquests of the Middle Ages forced conversion by threat of death. Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons constantly have the pressure of knocking on doors and being baptized for the dead - tirelessly working to try and earn their salvation. You would think that we have to coerce people into salvation or convince them to accept Christ with emotional pleas. That's where we would be, without this wonderful truth that the Holy Spirit converts by promises, not by power. When you compare your conversion to Abraham's, you can take comfort in the fact that God used the same means to convert you as he did Abraham.

III. The response

How did Abraham, the “Father of Faith” respond?

So Abraham left, as the Lord had told him. (Genesis 12:4). It’s a rather simple statement. But it’s that simplicity that really strikes us. So Abraham left. He didn’t think to himself, “hold on here Lord, I’m 75 for crying out loud. Why don’t you just establish me here? You want me to move all of my family - all of my livestock - all of my servants - hundreds of miles to a land I’ve never seen?” None of that. All it says is, *“Abraham left, as the Lord had told him.”*

Think about what Abraham did in modern day terms. Perhaps you know what it’s like to move - especially when you’ve accumulated a lot of STUFF. Imagine, if you could, owning a farm in Iowa, with dozens of workers and hundreds of cattle, and sheep and goats and oxen and chickens and having to relocate - not just next door to Nebraska, but down to southern Mexico. Abraham had to go through a number of different countries! And think of his age - he was no spring chicken - at 75. But he just did it. No questions. He believed that God would take care of him. He believed that he would have a child. The Lord didn’t just create faith in Abraham. He created an INCREDIBLE faith.

What happened once Abraham got there? *The Lord appeared to Abraham and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the Lord . . . and called on the name of the Lord.* He called on the name of the Lord means he began to worship the Lord openly, publicly. You would think that Abraham would have been a little disheartened at this point. After all the travel, God said, “by the way, Abraham, I’m going to give this land to your offspring - not to you.” If I were Abraham I would have said, “Well, I’m going back to Ur - forget this!” But what did Abraham do? He went ahead and built an altar to the Lord, who appeared to him. He publicly worshiped the true God. This never hindered his faith. Instead, he continued to take comfort in the fact that his offspring would own this land and he would still have a Savior. No wonder he is called the “Father of Believers.”

How do you compare to Father Abraham - Our Model of Faith? Here’s where we fall short. Even though we have similar backgrounds and were called in the same way, our response doesn’t match up to Abraham. How many Christians feel it is just too difficult to journey across town in a heated or air conditioned car because Sunday is “their only day to rest or their only day to get housework done.” Isn’t that a sad response? How many of us - instead of calling on the name of the LORD during sickness or accidents or financial crises, complain to him instead? We set out on the journey of marriage. But we have setbacks or squabbles or different ideas on how the money’s to be spent or how the kids are to be disciplined. Instead of setting up our altar and calling on God, we go back to Ur. We say to God, this is too tough, I want out. When our children or grandchildren start to drift away from the church, when they start to live an ungodly lifestyle - we want to smile and look the other way or become busy with our own lives instead of setting up an altar to God and offering prayers to help us speak up and take on our responsibilities. Instead of praising God, we complain to him about where he has put us in life.

But the comforting aspect in this whole thing is that our Lord is still the same. The same Lord who promised Abraham salvation through his Offspring is the same Lord who offers us salvation through that offspring. God’s forgiveness isn’t based on how we respond to his grace. It’s based on the promise of grace and forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ. It works just like a fifty dollar bill. It doesn’t matter who’s holding it, me, you, a child - it’s still worth fifty dollars. The value of the \$50 dollar bill isn’t based on who’s holding it - it has nothing to do with that. In the same way, our holiness, our righteousness, our salvation - are not based on our reaction to God’s grace. It’s based on God’s grace through Christ. So

you look just as holy as Abraham did, because you are covered with the same righteousness as he - through faith in the same Savior.

In a similar way, God promises you that YOU are going to heaven as one of his children - just like Abraham. When we compare ourselves to Abraham, we realize that we don't deserve to be in heaven. But when we compare what Abraham was and how he got to be the Father of Believers, it gives us comfort. Abraham didn't "deserve" it either. That's not why God chose him. It's all a gift of God's grace through Christ. So today, as we have looked at Father Abraham, it has been a humbling, but a rewarding experience - to know that we too - by faith in the same Savior - and through the righteousness of the same Savior - will end up in heaven with Father Abraham and all believers. That's God's promise to you. Amen.