

## Abraham

Abraham, or Ibrahim to Muslims, is called “father” by more people than any other man. The Jews refer to *Avraham avinu*, Abraham our father, because they are his descendants in a physical sense by his son Isaac. Arabs are also descendants of Abraham by his son Ishmael. Not only Arabs but other Muslims also consider him “the father of the prophets.” The New Testament calls Christians “the seed” or “posterity” of Abraham (Galatians 3:29), who is called “the father of all who believe,” and we speak of the need to “follow in the footsteps of the faith our father Abraham had...” (Romans 4:12,13).

So why are so many people today proud to call themselves the sons—whether physical or spiritual—of this man who lived about 4,000 years ago? The explanation is found in the quality of his faith in God. Consider three key events in his life where this faith was evident.

### HIS CALL BY GOD

The first was his call by God. Abraham lived in Mesopotamia, the region found between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and which now belongs to Iraq. According to Joshua 24:2, Terah, Abraham’s father, was, like his neighbors, an idolater. The God of the universe asked Abraham to make a complete break with this environment. We read in Genesis 12:1-5:

“The Lord said to Abram: ‘Go out from your land, your relatives, and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you... and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated, and the people he had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan.”

It would probably have been difficult to leave one’s country, one’s friends and one’s relatives forever. But Hebrews 11:8 stresses a detail which shows the need for a great confidence in God to obey such an order: “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed and went out to a place he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went out, not knowing where he was going.” Besides, there was no easy way

of keeping in touch with members of the family who stayed behind—no mail or telephone or rapid transportation to return for visits from time to time. Abraham would never again set foot in his home country.

This is important because God took this time to carry out His promise to give him a country of his own. Hebrews 11 continues:

“By faith he stayed as a foreigner in the land of promise, living in tents with [his son] Isaac and [his grandson] Jacob, co-heirs of the same promise... These all died in faith without having received the promises, but they saw them from a distance, greeted them, and confessed that they were foreigners and temporary residents on the earth. Now those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they were thinking about where they came from, they would have had an opportunity to return. But they now desire a better place—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.” (Hebrews 11:9, 13-16)

Already in the life of Abraham, we see an example which is easily applicable to ourselves. Through the Gospel, God also calls us to leave this world to seek a better homeland that He has promised us. For us, it is not necessarily a question of leaving a geographical place. It is rather a question of transferring our loyalties, changing our habits and values, of making a break with the world and the sin with which it is filled. Listen to these biblical passages:

“Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? And what agreement does God’s sanctuary have with idols? For we are the sanctuary of the living God, as God said: ‘I will dwell among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be My people. Therefore, come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord; do not touch any unclean thing, and I will welcome you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be sons and daughters to Me, says the Lord Almighty.’

Therefore, dear friends, since we have such promises, let us cleanse ourselves from every impurity of the flesh and spirit, completing our sanctification in the fear of God.” (2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1).

“Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12:2)

The promised land of the Christian is not found in the Middle East, in Palestine—it is in heaven. And to enter into possession of this heavenly country, we must detach ourselves in a way from this world down here. We are still in the world, of course, and called to be lights in the world, but we must see ourselves now as strangers. Our homeland and property are also somewhere else. Like Abraham, we cannot see these things physically with our eyes. We see them by faith. We accept the testimony of God. Being convinced of His faithfulness in all that He has promised, we can make a break with this world of sin. In this way, we walk in the steps of faith of our father, Abraham.

### THE PROMISE OF A SON

After having left his country, Abraham continued to show his confidence in God. This was in connection with another promise of God. In Genesis 15:1-6, we read:

“After these events, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield; your reward will be very great.’ But Abram said, ‘Lord God, what can You give me, since I am childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ Abram continued, ‘Look, You have given me no offspring, so a slave born in my house will be my heir.’ Now the word of the Lord came to him: ‘This one will not be your heir; instead, one who comes from your own body will be your heir.’ He took him outside and said, ‘Look at the sky and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then He said to him, ‘Your offspring will be that numerous.’ Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness.”

Remember that Abraham was already 75 years old when God called him. He had never had a child and his wife, Sarah, who was 65 years old, was barren (Genesis 11:30). Yet, time went on and Abraham could not help but wonder how God would carry out His

promise to make of him a great nation. But when God made his promise even more explicit, Abraham trusted Him. Even after this very direct promise, God made Abraham and his wife, Sarah, wait until they were 100 and 90 years old, respectively.

Nevertheless the patriarch did not abandon his faith in God. After 25 years of waiting, Abraham received what God had promised him. His wife Sarah, barren since her youth and now 90 years old, gave birth to his son, Isaac. Here is how the apostle Paul described the situation in Romans 4:18-22:

“Abraham believed and hoped, even when there was no reason for hoping, and so became ‘the father of many nations.’... He was then almost 100 years old; but his faith did not weaken when he thought of his body, which was already practically dead, or of the fact that Sarah could not have children. His faith did not leave him, and he did not doubt God’s promise; his faith filled him with power, and he gave praise to God. He was absolutely sure that God would be able to do what he had promised. That is why Abraham, through faith, ‘was accepted as righteous by God’.”

This idea is not easy for some people to accept, but it is fundamental: man is not morally just before God through his own righteousness, by his own good works. Abraham was a sinner, just as we are. The Bible doesn’t hide his weaknesses. He was a fallible man, just as we all are, and he was able to be saved only by the grace and mercy of God. When the Lord considered the life of Abraham, He did not see righteousness or moral perfection. But He saw sincere faith and obedience, a faith that was shown to be active and living from the day that God gave him the order to leave Mesopotamia. So the Bible tells us more than once, “Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). On the basis of Abraham’s faith and looking ahead to the sacrifice for sin that would be made by Jesus Christ, God counted Abraham as a righteous man.

Again we can apply Abraham’s example to our own lives. As we’ve seen, Abraham was not fooled by appearances (his age, his physical condition, the time that had passed since God had made the promise of a child, Sarah’s sterility, etc.). He did not doubt in his heart. Now, in general, people accept the Word of God only as far as they find it to be reasonable, in keeping with their experiences and conceptions. When it comes to material needs, they have trouble

giving generously, in spite of God's promises to bless the one who gives a lot with a good heart, because they can't see in advance how God will manage to compensate them.

When it comes to spiritual things, many do not want to obey the simple commands of God, such as the instruction to be baptized. They don't see logically how forgiveness of sins would be related to allowing oneself to be immersed in water. Instead of accepting God's words, they doubt and dispute. They need to consider and imitate the faith of Abraham, the father of believers.

### **THE ORDER TO SACRIFICE HIS SON**

The most difficult proof of Abraham's faith was shown some years later. When the son he had been promised and waited so long for had grown, God said to Abraham, "Take your son... your only son Isaac, whom you love, go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about" (Genesis 22:2). Imagine the thoughts that would cross your mind if you had been in Abraham's place. "How could God ask me to do such a thing? It's cruel. This doesn't make sense. Why would He give me a child just to tell me to kill him? It would have been better to not give him to me. I love this child more than anything else. It's too much to ask. How can God fulfill the other promises he made to me if I kill the one by whom those promises were to be fulfilled? How can I worship such a God?" But the Bible does not tell us much about Abraham's thoughts on this occasion. The text says simply:

"So Abraham got up early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took with him two of his young men and his son Isaac. He split wood for a burnt offering and set out to go to the place God had told him about... When they arrived at the place that God had told him about, Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood. He bound his son Isaac and placed him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the Angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' He replied, 'Here I am.' Then He said, 'Do not lay a hand on the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from Me.' Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it as

a burnt offering in place of his son." (Genesis 22:3, 9-13)

Abraham completely submitted himself to God. He did not allow himself to doubt the faithfulness and love of God. He obeyed Him promptly, even though he could not know the reason for the command. According to Hebrews 11:19, Abraham had this confidence in God: "He considered God to be able even to raise someone from the dead, and as an illustration, he received him back." What about us? God doesn't ask us to cut the throat of a child or sacrifice him on an altar. But can we agree to lose what is very dear to us in order to be faithful to God? Would we be willing die ourselves rather than deny Him? Are we confident that God will do what He promised in His word and that He loves us, no matter what tests we endure?

### **CONCLUSION**

As Jesus said, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did" (John 8:39). God's blessing promised to the descendants of Abraham—a spiritual blessing which consists of eternal life by faith in Jesus Christ—is for those who are true children of Abraham, those who show an active and obedient faith. Is Abraham your spiritual father?