

Abram

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[0 : 0 0] Every now and then I'll have a conversation with somebody who's perhaps either just starting out in Christian faith or who perhaps wouldn't even describe themselves as a Christian but nevertheless starting to take a look at the Bible.

And they will say something along these sort of lines. They will say, you know, I've just started to read the Bible and I wasn't quite sure where to start.

So I started right at the very beginning at Genesis. And, well, I've been trying to do this every day and I've lasted for about three days. And they will then go on to say how actually to find it a really, really puzzling thing.

And it's such an enormous book and yet just a few pages in, they're not quite sure how it is that we get from what they have read to all the things that we say about Jesus and how Jesus is so important, how he transforms our lives.

What I would like to say to anybody, the Bible is obviously not just one book, it's a whole library of books. But reading that library of books can be a little bit like a crossword.

[1 : 1 2] Sometimes if you do a crossword, at first it can take a really long time for it to kind of fall into place. And in these early stages there can be one, two particular things thinking, well, how on earth am I ever going to get that?

It just doesn't make any sense. But then you get one word and then you get another one. And only as you kind of begin to get a few more of those words, it all begins to fall into place.

And it's not until you actually have the whole thing before you, and that may take some time, that you see how it all connects together. When we read the story of the Bible, and by the way, I would never ever recommend starting at the beginning and going right the way through like that.

But when we find that story, which takes place over many, many, many centuries, when we come to that story, what we find when we stand back and we look at the whole, is everything points to Jesus.

It might not always be obvious. It might mean that we've got to really dig deep to kind of see how it fits in. But it all ultimately points to Jesus.

[2 : 3 0] See, our God is a rescuer. He sees we're in mess. And the whole message of Scripture is about God's rescue plan. Ultimately, in all its fullness, that rescue plan we see in the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus.

But before we get there, we have this really long narrative, which paves the way and points towards, directly or indirectly. And as we look at the different journeys in Scripture, we see how they just serve as examples of how Scripture points us to God's ultimate rescue plan that is Jesus Christ. So let's ask the question then, what does Abraham's story say to us? How does his journey, particularly this moment as he steps out in faith and follows the call of God into a place unknown to him, how does that point us towards that message that is the very centre of Scripture, the message of Jesus Christ as God's rescue plan?

Well, the first thing we can say is this, is that the story is all about stepping out into something new. Stepping out into something that is new. When we come to know Jesus, it is stepping into the new. It is being born again.

[4 : 0 3] It's like the lights come on. But it begins by stepping out into something new. And we need to be aware that that's something that actually is part of our, should be part of our everyday Christian experience, that we should see our lives as that stepping out into something new each day that God knows about that we don't.

See, that coming and coming to know Jesus and coming closer to Jesus is all about that sense of being spiritually woken up.

Theologian Tom Wright says that, you know, that phrase being born again can be understood as an experience of waking up. It might be that we come to faith in Jesus very quickly, very suddenly, very rapidly.

We can put a time and a date on it. That was when and where I became a Christian. That was when I started to follow Jesus. Bang! The lights came on. I was in the darkness and now I'm in the light. Sometimes waking up is like that.

You know, the alarm goes off. One moment you're asleep, then you're awake. On the other hand, says Tom Wright, there are those experiences when we wake up and it's a much more gradual experience.

[5 : 21] You know, the alarm goes and you kind of sort of wake, but you're not quite sure. And then you drift off again. And then you drift back into being awake and then back asleep and then back awake. And eventually, you've just about come into the land of the living.

And it might take a really, really long time to the extent where it's difficult to say exactly when it was that you were asleep and when it was that you were awake and when you made that point of transition.

Tom Wright says that when we're talking about being spiritually awake, it doesn't matter whether we're talking about an experience of coming to faith in Jesus that is sudden or gradual or a mix of the two.

The point is that there is such a thing as being spiritually asleep. Dead. And there is such a thing as being spiritually awake when the lights are on.

And there's all the difference between the two. When we come to this story of Abraham stepping out into the new, we need to remember that that is the life that Jesus calls us to.

[6 : 25] And not just at the point when we come to faith in him for the first time, but every day God has plans for you that you won't know about when you wake up. But he does.

And he calls you to step into that new. He says to Abraham, I will make you a great nation and bless you. I'll make you famous. You'll be a blessing. I'll bless those who bless you.

And those who curse you, I'll curse. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you. It points us forward to God's ultimate saving plan by which every day he will invite us into something new.

And that's exciting. The second thing, and it's kind of the other side of the same coin, that as Abraham was called to step out in faith, and as you and I are called to step out in faith, we're called to leave the past behind.

You see, the past can have such a grip on us that it can detract us from all the amazing things that God has ahead of us, ultimately in eternity, but even now for the rest of our time here on earth.

[7 : 30] You see, for Abraham, he had to leave behind everything that he was familiar with. The Lord said to Abraham, go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land I will show you.

You know, for Abraham, he must have been thinking, well, what am I going to, I've been here all my life, I'm going to, I'm expected to leave this behind. You know, leaving behind that which is familiar, that which is safe, that which we know about is such a hard thing.

And indeed, as we look back on the past, we find it a difficult thing to let go of. Things that we've, mistakes that we've made, things that we've got wrong.

The past, if we're not careful, can control us. And the invitation to follow Jesus is an invitation to let go as we step into the future. It's been some years ago, some years since I last went 10-pin bowling.

One thing I could, two things I can remember. One is I'm absolutely rubbish at it. But two is every time I do it, same thing happens.

[8 : 38] I pick up this massive, great big, what feels like a really massive, big heavy bowl. Go like this and try to pretend that I know what I'm doing. And then to just throw the thing down, which is probably where I go wrong, but throw the thing down.

And as it makes its way in the direction of these pins, I start to do this. Nine times out of ten, it goes into the little bit on the side.

I don't know what you call it. It says how much I know about it. But, you know, and it doesn't strike anything. But that doesn't stop me from twisting and turning, as though somehow that's going to influence the direction of the thing that's heading towards the pins.

There's something about that, I think, which resonates about the way in which we react to our past. That, you know, you've let go of that bowl. There's nothing you can do about it. And yet, we still contort and contract and move and twist and turn as though we can somehow influence that which has happened. We can't. You know, when you let go of that bowl, you've got to let go.

[9 : 47] And when God calls us into a future which we don't know about, and this was totally Abraham's experience, he calls us to let go of that past and to trust him for that future.

You know, that's perhaps easier said than done. But it's the reality of what we're called to do each and every day of our lives. And, you know, I think perhaps it becomes even more of a challenge the longer we've been following Jesus.

You see, this sense of entering the new, it doesn't, it never stops. And the danger can be that the longer that we've been following Jesus, that the older we get, the more we can feel that somehow we've exhausted all there is to know about it.

We've been to church so many times, we've heard so many sermons, we've read so many Christian books, you know, we've sung, we've sung so many Christian songs over the years that we've been there, we've got the spiritual postcard and there's nothing more left to be encountered.

You know, nothing could be further from the truth. You see, notice that in this story, Abram was how old when he stepped out in faith? 75 years old.

[11 : 01] And things were only just beginning for him then. However young or old we may be or feel, there's always more ahead.

And the danger can be that the longer we've been carrying around that message of the Christian gospel, we can become so familiarised with it that we forget just how life-transforming it is.

I'll tell you a story. One of the meetings that I really, really love going to every year is the Methodist District Synod. I love it. Several hours of sitting in a church, listening to all kinds of talks and presentations about church politics.

It's wonderful. One of the synods we have each year is a bit different and the focus is more on ministry. And part of that annual event is actually when ministers that are coming up to retiring will stand up and will share some of their stories of their experiences of ministry as they come up to retire.

And to be really serious for one moment, that is one part of the synod that actually I find absolutely fascinating. And there was one story a couple of years ago shared by a minister who was just coming up to retire and they had spent some of their ministry, I can't remember which exact country it was, but it was an eastern African state where the language was Swahili.

[12 : 36] and they couldn't speak a word of it when they first arrived. And so they said that they had to have an interpreter with them. And they'd been in ministry for some time, they'd been preaching for years, but they were leading this service that was in Swahili.

So they would preach in English and the translator would translate into Swahili. And they said that as this happened, that they couldn't quite understand the behaviour of the translator.

This minister said that they were preaching this sermon, they would pause for a line and allow for the translation to happen. And the further, the deeper they got into this message, the longer and more elaborate the translation seemed to be.

And as it happened, this translator didn't just stand there and translate, but started to get quite excited and quite emotional. And they couldn't understand how they would feed them one sentence in English and it would be followed by several sentences in Swahili as this translator jumped up and down and started crying and laughing and engaging and expressing all sorts of emotional responses.

They got about halfway through this and they thought something's going on here that I don't know about. So they took the translator to one side and they said, is everything all right? Yeah.

[14 : 07] It's your message. It's amazing. And this minister was thinking to themselves, is it? And they shared that story to say that ever since that experience, they have never, ever, ever gone into preaching with this sense of, well, it's just the same old message again.

And yet there's the danger that it can be. The assumption that we inadvertently take that actually this story has just been told so many times.

We've heard it all before. And that's not just the case if you're a preacher. It's true for any one of us. If you've been following Jesus and you've heard these stories over and over again, we can lose

sight of the power, the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

And that's something that we need to stay close to, to hold dear to. I remember years ago I was taking a wedding and we had the reading from Corinthians, Paul's passage on love.

And afterwards, somebody came up to me and said, what were those words? And I remember being taken aback and said, so what are you talking about? Those words in the service. I was thinking, what would we do that was so out of the ordinary?

[15:19] No, they opened up the order of service and they pointed exactly what they were referring to. And they were referring to the Bible reading from 1 Corinthians 13. They'd never heard it before.

As the conversation went on, it turned out that actually they hadn't heard much of the Bible at all before. We can become so accustomed to the story of Jesus, to the saving power of the Gospel, to the transforming power of the whole message, that we lose sight of just how amazing it is.

Abraham, at 75 years old, as he has this wake-up call from God, step out because I'm about to do something amazing in your life, reminds us that we must never become weary of this message because it is a message that is irrelevant every single day you woke up as it was the first day that you heard it and responded to it.

You see, we're called to be expectant. We're called to be in that position of poise to receive the Gospel every day as though it were the first time we've ever heard it.

That can be a frightening thing when that involves stepping out into the unknown. But it's what we're called to do in some way or another to embrace the unknown.

[16:53] For Abraham, at 70 years old, he was called to leave behind everything that he was familiar with and go off to a land trusting that even though he couldn't see it, God could.

And that may mean a different thing for each and every one of us but it is something that is for each and every one of us. That every day, even though we don't know what lies ahead, God does and he invites us to be poised.

So we come to pray. I want to share with you one last image. Could we have a picture on the screen of this particular animal? Does anyone know what animal that is? It's called an impala. It's an impala. It can jump over 10 feet high and over a distance over 30 feet. Extraordinary. And yet, if you put it in enclosed conditions in a zoo behind a wall that's only three feet high, it won't move.

It refuses to budge. And the reason why this animal that is capable of jumping such large distances will actually refuse to move if you surround it with such a small wall is this.

[18:12] Even though it can jump, it won't if it can't see where its feet will land. All of that potential, all of that power, and yet when it can't see where it's going, remains unleashed.

God has plans for each and every single one of us, no matter how old or young we are. Every day of our lives, danger can be we wince away because we don't know where it's going.

Abraham didn't know where it was going. But God said to him, as he says to you and me, come, trust me, I've got great things in store.

Let's pray together. Lord, thank you for this story of Abraham and how through him you point us to Jesus and show us that you are the God who rescues, the God who calls us to step out into something new, to step out into the unknown, to leave the past behind and to embrace what to us may be an unknown future, but to you, you know it all.

Lord, forgive us how we retreat from trusting in you. Forgive us for when we are reluctant to step out, to leave the past behind and to embrace that unknown future.

[20:07] Lord, whatever unknown future we may be facing now, help us to trust in you with that.

Help us to hand that over to you and to have the courage, whatever it means for each of us, to take that step forward, knowing that all is in your hands now and in the time to come.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.