

Abraham: The Unexpected Father

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Preacher: Tim Tree

- [0 : 0 0] Morning. Can you hear me okay? Oh, this is going to turn that one off maybe? Okay, great. I'm going to...
- I'm worried I'm going to hit it. I'm slightly concerned that Andy made me sound like the entertainment at the men's walk. I would really recommend it. We had such a great time last year.
- It was just great just to spend time with other men in the church. Ladies, sorry. I'm sure you will have your own event.
- So, Anne, can we have the first slide, as they say? Tales of the Unexpected. So we're going to be looking at different people, different circumstances, different chances that people are given, and how God sometimes uses people who you wouldn't have expected him to or keeps using people despite themselves.
- And today we're going to think about Abraham and Sarah or Abraham and Sarah. In fact, I think I've decided I'm going to call them Abe and Sarah for the rest of the morning because that way you won't notice when I get their names wrong because obviously they change.
- [1 : 1 7] Now, I'm hoping if I do that. So we're going to think about Abraham and Sarah as being unexpected parents or Abraham as being an unexpected father. I'm going to try in the next hour or so.
- No, he's kidding. Or is he? To cover 11 chapters of Genesis. So whether you do your Bible like that or whether you do it like that, I suggest you get it out because I'm going to be going through different bits.
- Maybe this week you can read the whole passage yourself. What you saw earlier, I love that. It's from a church in the States called Saddleback Kids.
- That is what I think we would describe as a highlights reel of Abe's and Sarah's life. You know, when people leave a reality show, they just show only the good bits.
- Today we're going to think about Abraham. We're going to think about him being a father. Not so much a father of a nation, although he was. Father of a big family, although he was.
- [2 : 2 4] Father eventually of the Messiah, although he was. We're going to think about his walk because he's sometimes called the father of faith. And we're going to look at a few snapshots of his life.
- But we're going to look at the cutting room floor as well as the highlights reel to understand how Abraham gets to that point in Genesis 22, which we finished with.
- So the first thing we're going to think about is Abraham's faithfulness to follow because faith follows. So if you've got your Bibles, I'm going to read from Genesis 12.
- It's entitled The Call of Abram. The Lord said to Abram, go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land I will show you. 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. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse. And all people on earth will be blessed through you.

[3 : 27] So Abraham went as the Lord told him, and Lot went with him. Abraham was 75 years old when he set out for Maharab. So God called Abraham, and he said, go from your country.

And it's interesting, in the Old Testament, we don't actually get much of the back story of Abraham. We hear more, actually, in the New Testament.

We find out that it was God who called him, and initially, he called him from somewhere called Ur, which was in Mesopotamia, which is a really cosmopolitan city.

And he was called out into a place that he didn't know, and he was promised he would be shown. So it was difficult for Abraham to go out.

Why did God choose this one person? Well, again, we don't get much of the back story. But we found out in Joshua that it wasn't because he was a particularly pious man.

[4 : 30] We're told, actually, when he was in Ur, he served other gods. He was an idolater. He didn't just serve the one true God.

So God called Abraham, and he followed. But he was called because God chose. He was not called because he was a good man.

And Stephen, in Acts, when he starts speaking about Abraham, actually says that God didn't just have to call him once. He had to call him twice. He came out from Ur, and he made it as far as Haran.

But it then seems he stopped there for a while before he eventually fully obeyed God and moved into Canaan. So God calls, and God persists in his call.

And actually, if you look at this passage, it's all about God, really, isn't it? I will make you. I will make you. I will bless you.

[5 : 35] The call of Abraham was about Abraham, but it was mainly about God and his goodness. And the obedience that Abraham had came with a promise, a promise of blessing.

Blessing that he would be a great nation. But blessing would come from his following God. The Bible says that all nations, all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

And blessing doesn't just mean financial or sheep or lots of descendants. It's actually talking about a restoration of the relationship between God and man.

The first 11 chapters of Genesis have told us that God made this fantastic world. And then in Genesis 1 and 3, we read about how it goes wrong.

And 4 through 11 show us how mankind really messes the world up. And it ends with the Tower at Babel. And now God is doing a new thing.

[6 : 43] And he said, I'm going to choose and I'm going to use. But I'm going to bless people and start putting things back together. And Abraham starts off good, doesn't he?

It says he was 75 and he set out from Haran. So faith follows the first bit of Abraham's life. And for each bit of his life, we're going to think about what it really means for us in SE24, which is where I think we are, in 2023.

And in the same way, we're all called to follow God, to follow Jesus. And again, not because we are good people, but because he is a good, good father.

Our journey of faith has to start with a call. But again, it comes with a promise. It comes with a promise that we will live life in all of its fullness.

So we are promised an inheritance, just like Abraham was, of a good, full life. Not an easy one, not a simple one, not a one without trouble, but a life that he's blessed.

[7 : 58] And again, just like Abraham, we are called to be a blessing to others. In the Lord's Prayer, it says, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Our forgiveness is meant to be passed on to others. And the goodness that God shows us and the blessing is meant to be passed on to others.

But just like for Abraham, it's a choice that each one of us has to make. And as we'll go through Abraham's story, we'll see that it's not a one-time decision.

It's funny when people start, when people talk about their journey of faith, so often all they talk about is their first initial decision, maybe. I have decided to follow Jesus, or maybe it should be, I decided to follow him.

But what's happened since? And as we look through Abraham's life, we'll see that there are choices that have to be made all the time. And that just as Abraham had choices to make, we are asked by Jesus to take up our cross daily and follow him.

[9 : 16] So faith follows, but it's a present, continuous action that we have to have. So, this bit doesn't make it into the highlights reel of Abraham's life necessarily, but let's read what happens in Genesis 12.

Now, a couple of verses at verse 10. So he's left Haran, he's moved into Canaan. But it says, Now there was a famine in the land, and Abraham went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.

As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, This is his wife, and then they will kill me, but will let you live.

Say you're my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake. And my life will be spared because of you. Yeah, it's a good one, isn't it?

Sometimes faith doubts. Sometimes faith doubts. The famine that made him leave Canaan, which is where God had called him, was no doubt real.

[10 : 36] There was a real problem. There was a serious problem. But he tried to solve that problem in the wrong way. He was called to live in Canaan. He wasn't called to live in Egypt.

And so perhaps at that point, his faith starts to doubt. We certainly know that just before it goes into Egypt, it definitely starts to doubt.

Now, obviously, I have a lot in common with Abraham. You are recording this, aren't you? You are in common with Abraham because I, too, have a beautiful wife. But his faith clearly doubts because what has God promised him?

He's promised him a great nation will come from him. He's promised him a future and children. And he's scared of being killed. And I don't remember much GCSE biology.

But I remember that you need a live person in order to have children. So there's no doubt that he starts to doubt God.

[11 : 44] He goes to Egypt. He really doubts God. And he gets Sarah involved in that doubt. They will kill me because of you. And he lies.

And they lie. And actually, I'm not going to read. This seems to be a problem that Abraham has. It's a terrible affliction, having a beautiful wife. But actually, if you read later, Abraham lies about exactly the same thing again when he meets another man called Abimelech.

And there he actually adds a subtlety to the story, which I'm not going to go into a great deal. He says, actually, there is some truth to me saying she's my sister.

Because actually, Sarai was his half-sister. That's another story for another time. And again, doesn't often make it into the children's version of the story of Abraham.

But you can imagine him thinking, well, it isn't completely untrue, is it? And doubt makes you do that, doesn't it? Justify the half-truths.

[12 : 51] But it was a continual problem in Abraham's life. This doubt that God would deliver him in the way that he had promised. So what about our faith?

Does it doubt? I heard someone say once that if we look at what we fear most, it shows where we probably trust God least.

If you think about the things that you fear most, the things in your life or in the life of those that you love, it may well highlight the areas in your life that you trust God with the least.

What are they for you? Your job? Your family? Your circumstances? Your relationships? Your health?

God has said that he will provide for us. And we need to be able to trust him. I wonder if a bit like Abraham, you sort of feel like you can trust him for the destination, but not for the journey, not how you get there.

[14 : 04] I actually think it's much easier to trust God with your eternity than it is with your tomorrow. Because there's nothing you can do really about your eternity.

But trusting him with your tomorrow is what he asks us to do as we walk by faith with him. And maybe just like Abraham, we have things in our life that are half-truths.

That's just my way. I lose my temper. That's just my way. Abraham's way was to doubt and to fear that God couldn't protect him. What do you doubt in your life that God can't change?

It can be like that corner in the path there. I think once we've walked down the road of doubt, it becomes easier to do again and to justify.

And that's what Abraham kept on doing. He justified the lie. She's only my half-sister. So it's not completely untrue.

[15 : 10] Sometimes faith doubts. So has Abraham blown it? Well, obviously not. You know the rest of the story.

Abraham believes. Let's jump on a couple of chapters to Genesis 15. And we can think about Abraham's faith that really does believe.

And I love how this chapter starts. God knows us so well. It's God's covenant with Abraham or his first covenant. After this, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision.

Do not be afraid, Abraham. I am your shield, your very great reward. But Abraham said, Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless?

And the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus. And Abraham said, You have given me no children. So a servant in my household will be my heir.

[16 : 12] Then the word of the Lord came to him. This man will not be your heir. But a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir. He took him outside and said, Look at the sky and count the stars, if indeed you can count them.

Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be. Abraham believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness. As I said, I love the beginning of that chapter because Abraham hasn't blown it.

He's gone out of God's will. He's gone out of God's best. But he comes out of Egypt. And actually, he comes out of Egypt better off than he went in. God can turn bad choices into good circumstances for us.

But as we'll look at later, he came out with one thing that would trip him up as well. But God knows and understands us. I'm so amazed that God didn't sort of tell him, Now look, this is your last chance now.

He starts off by reassuring him. He knows that Abraham was afraid. And so the first thing that he says is, Fear not.

[17 : 24] Do not be afraid, Abraham. I am your shield, your very great reward. God isn't angry with him. He addresses his fears and restates his promise.

I love that thing that you read at the bottom of all financial investments. What does it say? Past performance cannot or should not be taken as indicative of future.

How's it going? Past performance should not indicate future outcome or something. I love the fact that what we've done in the past doesn't mess up what God can do with us in the future.

Abraham believed God. And God made a covenant with Abraham. And I don't have time to read the whole covenant that he made.

But in your own time, read the rest of that chapter, of chapter 15. It goes a little bit Harry Potter, I think, the rest of the chapter.

[18 : 30] The way that God makes his covenant with Abraham is not, you know, a handshake or a docu-sign as we do nowadays. He says, take some animals and cut them in half and lay left side and right side down.

And birds come down and feed on these dead carcasses. And then Abraham falls into a deep sleep. And then he sees this flaming torch and a flaming pot pass between them.

And to us, that sounds really weird. But to people in those days, it would have made sense. They used to make vows or covenants by cutting animals in half.

And two people would walk between the dead carcasses. And they were saying that if I break my part of this pact, may what happened to these animals happen to me.

And what's amazing when you read this story is that God makes that promise with Abraham. And Abraham falls into a deep sleep. And the torch is a symbol of God passing between those dead animals.

[19 : 46] He seals the covenant. And the covenant that he makes with Abraham is based on him and his goodness, not on Abraham and his ability to obey.

And the same thing is true for us. I don't know how much of the news you've watched this week, and I'm not going to make any political or other comments about this, but I was really sad when I saw Philip Schofield being interviewed.

His hands were shaking. And he said, I can see no future for myself. He could see no chance of forgiveness, no chance of redemption. He said, that's it, my life's over.

God's not like that with us. Is he? We have the ability to, he has the ability to reroute our life, just like he did with Abraham.

Jesus said, whoever calls on the name, sorry, he said, whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. And just like with Abraham, God was patient with him.

[21 : 00] Before the covenant was made, Abraham says, I believe, but I don't have children. How can I be certain this is really going to happen?

And that's when God makes this covenant with him. And I love the story of the man whose child is healed.

And Jesus said, all you need to do is believe. And the man said, I do believe, but please help my unbelief. So faith believes, but God knows that our faith struggles to fully believe him.

And just like a great darkness fell on Abraham when that covenant was made, and God walked between those dead animals and said, I'm sealing this promise with you.

I love the fact that we've just served communion, because many thousands of years later, the skies went dark again, didn't they? And Jesus walked through death for us to seal that promise for each one of us.

[22 : 11] And again, our forgiveness and our restoration and our relationship with God is not based on our goodness. It's not based on our ability to obey God.

It's based on his goodness through what he did, through Jesus dying on the cross. He alone is able to save us.

So faith believes, and it was credited to Abraham as righteousness. So surely now everything's on the up, isn't it?

Well, the next chapter, again, a scene from the cutting room floor. I'm going to read just the first four verses.

Genesis 16, sometimes faith compromises. Now Sarai, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children, but she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar.

[23 : 11] So she said to Abraham, the Lord has kept me from having children. Go sleep with my slave. Perhaps I can build a family through her. Abraham agreed to what Sarai said.

And so Abraham had been living in Canaan 10 years. Sarai, his wife, took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife.

He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. 10 years is a really long time to wait for anything, isn't it? And they'd been living in the land for 10 years, and Abraham's wife, Sarai, had borne him no children.

And so she maybe compromised. She said, she acknowledged that God had the power over fertility. She said, the Lord has kept me from having children.

But she compromised in how that child came about. And I can, again, I can imagine sort of maybe what went around her mind. She said, God promised Abraham children, didn't he?

[24 : 23] Does that have to be through me? And she starts to compromise, and she says, go and sleep with my slave. Perhaps I can build a family through her.

And this was actually quite a common practice in the culture that they came from, but not the one that they were called to live in. It was normal that a man could have more than one wife.

So Hagar became his concubine. Maybe she thought, you know, along the lines of that famous proverb, which is not in the Bible. God helps those who...

There was a problem. She saw a solution. It just wasn't God's best. And if you read the rest of the Old Testament, you see that there was trouble and strife because of his second wife.

And so it can be with us, I think. It's easy for us sometimes to compromise our faith, to not believe every promise that God has made is for us.

[25 : 35] It's hard waiting for his promises when we don't see the progress we want. Like Sarah, it's quite easy, I think, for us to swim with the tide, to go with the norms in our culture, to go along and to compromise.

And I think it's very easy to see compromise in other people, but it's really hard to see where we compromise. I was at a conference in Paris two weeks ago, and it's the first time I've got together with this group of scientists since before COVID.

And it was funny because I looked at several of them and I went, ooh, you know, the lockdown's been good to you, hasn't it? You've grown out and grey.

And I hadn't seen these people for five years, and I could see real changes in them. And I thought, you may have compromised your exercise regime. But actually, when I look in the mirror, and actually I look back at pictures of me five years ago, I go, ooh, you've changed a little bit as well.

Not all for the good. And it's really hard to see what we are really like. It's easy to see compromise in others.

- [27 : 03] You can imagine, you know, Abraham saying, well, I'm not like those people in that town over there that begins with S. I'm not like the people in Sodom, am I?
- My compromise isn't as great as theirs. But where do we compromise? Again, in our work, that's just what you need to do to get ahead.
- Everybody does it. In our relationships, in how we speak about other people, in how we think about our leaders, how much time do we spend criticising those put in authority over us as opposed to praying for them.
- God calls us to live different lives. Not separate, but like salt and light being present so that we can be a difference in our culture.
- Sometimes faith can compromise. But ultimately, faith acts and faith does. And don't worry, I'm not going to read all of Genesis 17.
- [28 : 09] I can see people getting, he's promised us an hour. But we're not halfway through. Eventually, faith does. And I'd like, you know, read Genesis 17 yourself.
- I'll just read the first verse. It says this. When Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty. Walk before me faithfully and be blameless.
- Once again, God restores Abraham. No harping on about his past mistakes, his past compromises.
- Even though you're old, there's things for you to do. 99. I once heard someone say, if you're not dead, God's not done. He still has things he wants to change in every one of us.
- And in this chapter, we see them change their names. God says, I'm going to convince you that you really do have a new identity that I'm going to give to you.
- [29 : 12] He promises them again that they will have a child. As for your wife, Sarai, you are no longer to call her Sarai.
- Her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations. Kings of peoples will come from her.
- And again, I don't want to be indelicate, but they had to act in order for that promise to come to fruition. I remember enough biology to know that that's true.
- That we have to act sometimes in order for God's promises to be fulfilled in our lives. Your wife, Sarah, will have a son.
- And then finally, there's the covenant of the circumcision. And again, I wonder what was on the cutting room floor where Abraham said, I'm 99.
- [30 : 14] I might be a bit hard of hearing, but can you just repeat that? And it might have sounded strange, but it was done for Abraham's benefit, not God's.
- A mark in his flesh that would always remind him and his people of the promise that God made for them. And unlike in the past, he acts.
- It said, on that very day, he and all of his household were circumcised. So what about us?
- Faith does. There's a lot of argument in the New Testament between people like Paul and some of the other believers about the relative merits of faith and works.
- And it's interesting that both Paul and James use the example of Abraham to prove that faith and works are like a hand inside a glove.
- [31 : 17] James uses the example of Abraham to say, faith without deeds is dead. Someone said, obedience is the fruit that grows on the tree of faith.
- That when you have faith, it will naturally manifest itself in obedience. And what ways can we be obedient to God?

Well, in all the things that he'd asked us to. But actually, there is one thing, and we were in a Baptist church, and so I'm going to mention it. God has called us to follow him in baptism.

Again, it's a bit like circumcision. It's a bit weird, maybe. But it's a way in which God wants us to demonstrate what he has done for us.

And God is faithful and loves it when we obey him. His love for us is not contingent on our obedience.

[32 : 22] But no Lord is not a possible sentence to say because one of those words can't sit next to the other.

And finally, don't worry, I'm not going to read anything from these two. Well, actually, I will. I'll read the very beginning of chapter 21, the birth of Isaac.

Now, the Lord was gracious to Sarah, as he had said. And the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. And it says that she became pregnant and she had a son.

And that it turned her tears into laughter because ultimately, faith changes. It changed her tears into joy.

And the Lord was gracious because he is good. And he did what he said that he would do. And I'm not going to mention Genesis 22 other than to say this.

[33 : 27] It's a chapter which I have always struggled with. God asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. I know people that find it so difficult.

In fact, I know one person who said, I read that chapter and I don't want to come back to church again. But it's really interesting. You read chapter 22 and you don't see Abraham complaining.

You actually don't see him doubting. I think because faith changes us, you see him now able to trust God and know that he would indeed provide the sacrifice.

And so it should be for us. Our faith should change us. Our faith should help us to trust God more, to trust in his promises, to find obedience to him a joy.

So how is your faith? I love this phrase, exercise your faith. It shows that it gets stronger, maybe, when you use it.

[34 : 38] So how is your faith? Have you left Ur? Because it's a choice you have to make. Are you stuck in Haran?

Moved on a bit, but not really living the way God wants. Are you doubting some of his promises? Are there areas in your life where you're compromising your faith?

The one thing I think we can see from the life of Abraham is that there will be ups and downs, but ultimately God is faithful.

And so we know that Abraham, who, if we think what he was, he was called, but he was a liar, he was an idolater, and he was an adulterer.

But God loved him and used him for his glory. And so as we close, let's think about the life of Abraham and remember that whoever you are, you're called by name, by God, and that you're only a step away from the next step in your journey.

[35 : 50] May you know that there's nothing that you can do that can separate you from God's love, that because of his sacrifice, he is faithful. And may you know that he has promises and blessings for you, for your life.

And may you be able to trust him, not just for eternity, but tomorrow morning. Amen.