

Abraham 1

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[0 : 00] Turn with me for a short time this evening to the chapter we read, Genesis chapter 12.

And reading at verse 1 once again, Genesis chapter 12, and at the beginning, Now the Lord had said to Abram, Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house into a land that I will show thee, and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great, and thou shalt be a blessing, and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee, and in thee all families of the earth shall be blessed.

So Abram departed as the Lord had spoken unto him. Some time ago you'll remember that we went through a series of sermons entitled From Adam to Abraham.

And tonight I want us to begin another series that starts, that takes up from where we left off. And I promise it won't be a long series.

People have different views about ministers who do series, and I think that depends very much on how long he takes to it. I certainly don't intend to take months, and I certainly don't intend to be a verse-by-verse series.

[1 : 31] But I think we must also remember that the Bible has been given to us as one continuous story from start to finish. It goes from Genesis to Revelation. And there's something to be said for recognizing that by following the story as it is given to us.

And I want to do that in such a way so as not to get bogged down in the details and in the complexities of the Bible, and to remember also, but to remember also that the Bible has been given to us as a book from start to finish.

And I suppose in a congregation like this where myself and Mr. McLeod take turns, I suppose we get the best in that case of both worlds.

And if one of us does a series and the other one doesn't, then that should keep everyone reasonably happy. Some people, of course, love to get into the Word, and I think we should all love to get into the Word as deeply as we possibly can.

But again, with a congregation as varied and as diverse as this one, where everyone is at different stages, then it's up to the ministers involved in that congregation to try and pitch things correctly.

[2 : 44] And I hope I do that, and I'm sure I speak for Mr. McLeod as well. I hope that we do that. We try and pitch it as best we possibly can. Tonight, I want us to just begin by looking at what we might call the faith and the failure of Abraham.

The faith and the failure of Abraham. And when we look at the faith of Abraham, I might say, first of all, that unlike many other Bible characters, and I'm sure you know many, many of the Bible characters, the story of Abraham is taken up not at the time of his birth.

Moses we know about his birth. Samuel we know about his birth. And other men as well we know about their birth. But the story of Abraham comes in when he's old, when he's 75 years old.

That means that for 75 years, we don't know anything about him. His whole life is completely unknown for 75 years. And it's almost as if his life begins at the age of 75.

And in a way, it does. If he hadn't been a believer in the Lord before, and if God's word to him marked the turning point in his life when he began to follow the Lord, then that was the time when he became the man that he was.

[4 : 02] Normally, I suppose you'd be expecting someone of that age to be kind of winding down as far as life was concerned. But this is when Abraham comes to life. And I suppose at that age, of course, in those days, the lifespan that you could be expected to live to was longer, although it was now very much reduced.

Noah lived 950 years old. 950. And within a few centuries, Abraham only lives to something like about 160 or thereabouts.

So the lifespan has been reduced. And that, of course, was according to God's word. The other thing about Abraham is that he doesn't appear to have done anything particularly remarkable or dramatic, apart from that one mysterious chapter, and we'll come to it, where it appears he's about to kill his only son Isaac.

Apart from that one mysterious chapter, Abraham is not known for anything that he actually did. For example, he's not a Noah who built the ark.

He's not a Moses who led the Israelites, two million Israelites, across the Red Sea on dry land. Now that was something really dramatic.

[5 : 27] He wasn't a David who led Israel, who was the king of Israel, one of the most powerful men in his time. But Abraham, as far as the outside things, as far as his deeds are concerned, he didn't appear to have done of hardly anything.

And yet he is mentioned over 70 times in the New Testament. That's how much the Bible thinks about Abraham. That's the place that the Bible gives to Abraham.

He's given a place by the Jewish race and the Jewish nation and the Jewish religion. He's the father of Judaism and he's the father of the Jewish people who are alive in great numbers and great force to this day.

He's the father of all God's people. We can say, if we trust in Jesus, we are Abraham's seed. What is it about him that gives him such a great place?

It certainly wasn't anything he did on the outside. So what was it? I remember going to see a movie when I was a teenager once in Glasgow.

[6 : 27] I remember this movie came out called The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes. I remember when it came out at first, I thought I have to see this because I'd read some of the Sherlock Holmes books and I was really interested in crime solving and all of these things.

It was very interesting. And I went to see this film about The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes because I thought that it must contain some crime or some dramatic rescue and solving some complex crime or other.

And I can remember sitting there absolutely, totally bored. Completely bored. It was rubbish. It was rubbish. Because I was expecting this to be a crime and for Sherlock, of course, we all know that Sherlock Holmes was a detective and the stories about him are all about some crime that happened and how he cleverly and skillfully solved that crime.

But in this, there was nothing because it was all about the kind of house he lived in and the kind of books he read and his private life. Well, who's interested in that? The only reason we're interested in Sherlock Holmes, or at least as a boy, the only reason I was interested in was because of the crimes that he solved.

See, these are the things he did on the outside. That was what he was famous for. He wasn't famous for what he was on the inside. He was famous for what he was on the outside. But Abraham was Abraham because of what he was on the inside.

[7 : 54] And so I might give the title to the series of sermons called The Private Life of Abraham because that's the key to Abraham's greatness, his private life.

Abraham is not a hero because of something he did or a series of things that he did, but because of what he was. Because in Abraham, you have a man who loves to love God and it's his relationship with God that is the key to Abraham's greatness, the key to his strength, the key to who he was.

And faith lies at the very centre of Abraham's life. What can we say, first of all then, about Abraham's faith? First of all, it was a faith that took hold of God's word and listened.

It listened to God's word. The very first thing we find out about Abraham is at the beginning of chapter 12 that the Lord said to Abraham, Go out of your country and from your family and from your father's house to a land that I will show you.

And that was God speaking to Abraham. I don't know whether he did that in a dream or by a prophet or some vision. It doesn't matter. It was God's word speaking directly to Abraham and Abraham's faith, first and foremost, listened to God.

[9 : 15] We might say this. Let me put it like this. What marks Abraham out from every other historic character in the history of mankind? What is it that singles him out as being a unique and a special and a particular character?

What is it about Abraham? Well, I'll tell you what it is. He listened to God. And that's where faith begins. Faith is not about what religion we belong to or what ceremonies we go through or anything

like that.

Faith begins, real, true faith, starts with God. And whether or not you and I are prepared to listen to God's word. You look at all the great men and women of faith in the Bible that are listed for us in Hebrews 11.

What's true about every single one of them? What is it that they all have in common? Where did their life of faith begin? It began not with them but with God. God speaking to them.

And faith begins when we simply listen. To listen and take heed to what God is saying to us. And that's what Abraham did. That's where faith begins. If you're trying to figure out and wrestle with what faith is tonight, that's where it begins.

[10:26] You go to the word of God. You listen. Faith comes by hearing. That's what the apostles said. The apostles said. And the importance of church is not that by coming to church in itself that you will be saved.

But so that by coming to church you will hear the word of God in the promise and in the prayer that through hearing you will come to faith in the Lord.

He listened, first of all, to the word of God. But then secondly, it was a faith that believed that God would keep his promise to him.

Even although that promise was quite utterly impossible in a natural sense. You see, if you go through the promise, you'll find it in verse 2 of chapter 12.

I will make of you, said God to Abraham, a great nation. And I will bless you and make your name great. And you shall be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you.

[11:32] And in you shall all families of the earth be blessed. Now that's all very well except for the fact that Abraham was 75 years old and his wife was 10 years younger than him and they were already past the age of childbearing.

And here was God and he's coming to Abraham and he's saying, I know how old you are and I know how old your wife is and I know that in a natural sense it is quite impossible for you to have a son but yet I am promising you and I'm giving you my word that you will have a son.

And Abraham believed that promise. He also believed that God would give him the land that he was leading him to and he also believed that in time to come that through his offspring all nations were going to be blessed.

Now Abraham was only an ordinary person. He was an ordinary resident of Ur of the Chaldees and latterly Haran. And there is God saying that he was going to make his name great and he was going to make him a blessing but the greatest of all the promises of course was this, simply this, that God was going to be his God.

And it was one thing to believe God initially but it was another thing altogether to continue to believe God year after year after he entered into the land of Canaan and God still hadn't kept his promise.

[12:51] 25 years. Do you know how long Abraham had to wait from the time he came into Canaan till the time God fulfilled his promise and he had a son? 25 years.

With every year that passes it's another year in which it's becoming even more impossible for his wife to bear a child. And yet God's made the promise and Abraham believes and believes and believes and doesn't matter how impossible it is because the living and true God is the God of the impossible.

So that's the second thing about Abraham's faith. He believed that God would keep his promise.

And again as Christians as those who believe in the Lord today we can identify with Abraham because God has made an equally impossible promise to us through his word.

And that is this that a day will come it doesn't matter how impossible it is when those who are dead and buried and those whose bodies have been destroyed and those who have died years ago centuries ago hundreds of years ago will cut and long time decomposed and scattered to the winds will come to life again and be reconstituted and will rise again.

Why? Because God has said so and faith takes hold of that promise and it says I believe it simply because God has said it. That's why tonight we can identify with Abraham.

[14:24] Faith is the same. It is taking hold of God's word but it's not only that it's acting on God's word too. That's the third thing. It's acting on God's. I don't think we really fully appreciate how Abraham's life changed after he obeyed God and left his home his hometown of Ur of the Chaldee.

I don't know how much you know about Ur of the Chaldees. Up until the 1920s not very many people knew anything about Ur of the Chaldees until a fellow called Charles Leonard Woolley he's an archaeologist very famous archaeologist and he went to Ur of the Chaldees and started digging he found he found where Ur of the Chaldees was and he's got a couple of books that are absolutely fascinating one of them is just simply called Ur of the Chaldees if you're interested you can still buy it's not in print anymore but you can buy it second hand shops and it's still quite widely available and if you're really interested I have a copy if you want to borrow it it's quite quite fascinating you know this idea that in those days people lived in caves and they just grunted and they lived from day to day and they built fires and they went about in bearskins nonsense it's absolute rubbish Ur of the Chaldees this is what Charles Leonard Woolley found he found that Ur of the Chaldees had brick built houses two story brick built houses he found that inside those houses there were fully equipped kitchens much more modern than you and I would ever expect from that time before Christ much more than thousands of years before Christ he found that they were far more advanced than you and I ever give them credit for and he found that there was plumbing he found that there was plumbing in those houses thousands of years before Christ we think we're the ones who are modern and of course we are much more modern but don't think for a moment that these people because they were primitive that they had nothing they didn't they had lots and because of what

Charles Leonard Woolley found it gives us an insight into what Abraham left behind Abraham left behind a comfortable existence a modern existence when he left behind but more than that that was the place where he had been brought up in it's a place where he called home I don't know if you've if you're I suppose many of the people here in this congregation you've never left Lewis maybe you did for two or three years to go to study or whatever but you came back again and here is the only place you ever know apart from the odd trip to Inverness or Glasgow or whatever this is your home it's the only and the idea of leaving this place to go to a place a country where you've never been before would be horrendous to you you could never face it because you could never face living anywhere but home now this is that's the kind of situation Abraham faced that's the kind of situation he faced I don't think we really

I don't think we really appreciate what Abraham what it cost Abraham to simply listen to God's word take him on his word and obey because the word the command of God was to leave out of the colonies and not just for a time six months or a year but forever his two story house his plumbing his comfortable existence his family his friends his community everything that he ever knew his language there would have been a totally different language in Canaan probably there's probably many different languages in Canaan and to go to a land that he knew nothing about in fact God didn't even tell him where he was leading him all he said was go to a land I will show you now you put yourself in that position and then you'll begin to appreciate the kind of faith Abraham had that simply laid hold on this God and said I don't know what lies in front of me

I don't know what God has in store for me I don't know anything about this blessing that God speaks about but I'm on the strength of what God has promised I leave it all behind that's what Abraham did and he did so on the strength of one thing and one thing alone I will bless you he didn't even know what that meant didn't know what lay ahead of him and neither do you but that was enough see that's the promise of the gospel and in the gospel the Lord comes to us in his word and he calls you and myself to follow the Lord Jesus Christ doesn't tell us what we have in store for him but he tells us that as we follow the Lord Jesus I will bless you and that's it and that's the greatest thing that we can have because you can have it all you can have fame and fortune you can have possessions you can have riches and success and everything that this life has to offer if you don't have peace with God you have nothing at all nothing at all and Abraham saw this and he was prepared to leave behind all his earthly comforts in order simply to do what God had told him to do that is what faith is all about but faith does not equal an easy life you'd think you know on one level that if God was going to bless him that everything from that moment onward would be downhill that God would reward him somehow for the sacrifice that he had made you would think well here is Abraham he's leaving behind the land and the environment he knows surely God is going to make it easy for him but he didn't you read the life of Abraham you read a life that is tried and a life that is full of trouble you find famine this chapter tells us famine imagine getting up in the morning and finding you've got no food in your tent you don't know where your next meal is going to come from you find war he's surrounded by enemies he's full it's a life full of fear of the unknown it's a life full of disappointment it's a life full of tension in his home and hardship and a life in which he has to live the rest of his life

in tents in tents that's what

[21 : 05] Hebrews 11 tells us that that was the major change that took place in Abraham's life that from then on he lived as a sojourner that's an old word for a traveler a person who travels from place to place from then on at that time of life normally you would expect for him to be settling down in one place and hoping to become more comfortable until the day he died but no God called him to be a sojourner a traveler living in tents it also meant that Abraham's faith was going to be tested because every time you have genuine faith it's always a faith that is tested there's no such thing as genuine faith that isn't tested in some way or another and when God tests a person's faith it's to prove that that faith is genuine but it is always painful and hard and involves us having to face and to wrestle with difficulties the kind of difficulty that Abraham had to face as he went down to Egypt do you think that faith means that whenever something is going to happen that God somehow you know

I think some people fall into that way of thinking that they think well you know if I really am a child of God then surely my life ought to be easier than this surely surely God ought to protect me more than he does surely God ought to explain things more than he does surely God ought to tell me why things are happening in my life well that's not what we find in Abraham's life at all we find him going for long long periods of time with no explanation about what's happening in his life and you can only imagine how Abraham would wonder and wonder at what God was going to do but that's where faith is tested because faith and patience and trust and following God following God through the Lord Jesus Christ it goes hand in hand do you think that Abraham is going to always feel a sense of peace and a sense of presence even as he's going through hardship that's not the life we read about at all but it's a life in which he simply remembers

God's word and lays hold upon that word but it's important for us tonight to also see that Abraham's faith was one which lived in the real world it wasn't cushioned and it wasn't pampered but it was challenged by the kind of decisions that he would have to take in the real world because it's as we react to difficult situations that our witness becomes apparent to those who are watching us see it's easy to be a Christian when the going is easy but when things get really tough that is when our faith in the Lord is tested so we've said something about his faith I want to just say one or two things for the next ten minutes or so about his failure because faith when God leads a person when a person follows the command of God it doesn't mean that that person is immune from failure

I don't know one person in the Bible one single man or woman who is a child of God in the Bible who hasn't failed and one of the things I love about the Bible is the way that we can find realistic people like ourselves and it doesn't try and hide their shortcomings and their blemishes and their tarnishes and all the things that they did wrong the Bible doesn't try and hide us from the fact that these were real sinful men and women like ourselves and I take great encouragement from that because it's in the failure of others not because I gloat and say ah if that's your Abraham's what kind of a Christian is it that's not the sense I'm talking at all it's because I see in those people and so do you our own failures and our own human weaknesses now what in this chapter there was a famine I don't know how long it was since he came into Canaan but there was a famine in the land and Abraham had to go down to

Egypt because obviously in Egypt there was there was a crop there was a harvest there was plenty of food so he had to go down there in order to buy food and in order to live there for a while until the famine north in Canaan was over however there was a problem at least in Abraham's mind there was a problem and that was his wife his wife was a very beautiful woman and so he said to her just before he went to Egypt he said Sarah behold I know that you are a fair woman to look at and the Egyptians are going to want you and if they know that you're married to me then they're going to kill me in order to get you as their wife because they think nothing these Egyptians are barbarians they think nothing of killing one person in order to get his wife that's what they're going to do so in order to avoid this bloodshed in order to save my life this is what you're going to do you're going to say that you are my sister in other words you're going to lie say that you're my sister and so that if they take you well and so be it but at least my life will be spared and that's exactly what happened sure enough the Egyptians saw that she was a good looking woman and she was taken into

[26 : 30] Pharaoh's palace and because they thought that Abraham as her brother was the one from whom they should get permission if they were going to marry her they heaped they started giving presents to him loads and loads of presents in order to win his favour hoping hoping that they would get permission from him for Pharaoh to marry her you see that's why he became so rich

that's why he ends up with a whole pile of manservants and maidservants and sheep and oxen and asses and everything you could think of because they were trying to essentially buy her from him but you see that put him in an even more awkward position because how is he going to give away his own wife how is he going to give permission to for someone else to marry the person that he has married you see he gets himself it's one of these stories where you can see that he's he's going into a downward spiral and he's as we would call it he's digging a hole for himself and it gets deeper and deeper and deeper and his situation is getting more and more and more awkward all the time now you see

I suppose you expect me tonight to say well to point out how wrong Abraham is and you might even say that he was wrong in going down to Egypt in the first place after all surely if he believed that the Lord had led him to Canaan then what's he doing in Egypt you might expect me to say that his very journey to Egypt was a wrong one but I'm not going to start off by saying that at all that's obvious it's obvious my first question is what would I have done if I had been Abraham what would I have done I don't know if I would have acted any differently you see the easiest thing in the world is for us to sit in our chairs and say ah these these people in the Bible you know and to point out their wrong and the steps that they took to wrong doing and how they are a warning to us and where they went wrong that's the easiest thing in the world but my first question is would I have done any differently if I had been Abraham faced with that same if I had had the character of Abraham perhaps he wasn't a particularly secure

I'm not trying to make excuses for him neither am I trying to suggest that that this passage is is not a warning to us of course it is but I'm not sure I'm not sure at all if I would have acted any differently same as Peter easiest thing in the world is for me to say it was because Peter took his eyes off the Lord Jesus when he tried to walk on the sea of Galilee that he started sinking dead easy to say that that's obvious I think I would have done the same having been faced with a storm on the sea and the fear that that created or Peter denying the Lord we're all weak human beings sinful human beings just like these men and these women in the Bible every single one of us and here is a man who is struggling he would never and you know the first thing that strikes me about this he would never have had to face this problem if he hadn't obeyed

God's word in the first place and left out of the coldness if he hadn't been a man of faith you could say on one level that if he had stayed at home his life would have been so much easier he would never have had to wrestle with all those problems it was his faith that took him into the most difficult of situations where he had to face the most horrendous challenges and sometimes he failed and you know you're going to fail as well just the same way as I do even as a person who follows Jesus Christ we are failures and we fail often we fail frequently but that doesn't mean to say we can't live as Christians in the real world what strikes me about this chapter even through Abraham's failure is that he's putting his faith into practice in the real world where we have to take decisions which are not easy and we have to take steps that are not easy for the Christian to take you see many of you this evening are going to have to wake up tomorrow morning and go into the real world a world of business a world of the workplace a world where wherever you work or wherever you go to school and the kind of world that we face the real world is not an easy one it's one in which we struggle and wrestle and in which we have to face some of the most horrendously difficult things in this world and sometimes we fail by trying to put our faith into practice the easiest thing in the world is for Christians to avoid as much as possible difficulty but that's not what the Christian life is all about it's not what the Lord expects us to be either he said to us that we are in the world although we're not of it we are in the world and we have to be as involved as he was the Lord Jesus himself and yet act in such a way that is consistent with what we are where did Abraham go wrong well the simple answer is this that he left God out of the equation he became overwhelmed by his own sense of fear and you know his fear was that when the Egyptians would see Sarah they would fall for her so much because she was obviously a very good looking woman and he was afraid that they would fall for her but he kind of built up his fear was built up fear in his imagination they all sort of mingled in together and built up a picture which was completely imaginary because it turns out that this would never have happened at all the Egyptians had far more moral sense than he ever credited them with but that's what fear does to us it works against faith let me ask you a question tonight are you afraid of something is there something in your life which has gripped you with fear and it seems to have paralyzed you with fear and there's all kinds of scenarios growing out you know when you wake up sometimes at night in the middle of the night and you start thinking about something and

you can't sleep and you start thinking about something you start thinking about what lies ahead of you some kind of some kind of imaginary happening and it's always the worst it's always the very very worst isn't it you wake up in the morning you think well how stupid

[33 : 42] I was to think about all of these things but that's what fear is it works against faith and pushes trusting in God out of the picture and it turns out in actual fact that Abraham's fears were completely unfounded now how many of your fears tonight are your own imagination because the devil will try and get in and he'll paint the most horrendous picture in order to push your trust of God out of your heart let's bring God back into the picture and let's remember tonight God is in control no matter how many what ifs there are in my life there is one thing I can say for sure that God is always in control of everything and the

God who brought Abraham out of the Chaldees into Canaan is the God who promised to keep him and to protect him and to be with him and that's what got obscured by Abraham's fear make sure tonight that if you're prone to fear that you don't allow that fear to push the greatness and the love and the faithfulness of God out of the picture and then lastly of course this all led to an action which was deceitful on Abraham's part and actually which brought a rebuke from the very Egyptians themselves who knew very little of anything about the real the living and the true God what is this you have done they said to us when God intervened at last and he did so by inflicting the Egyptians with disease or some kind of disease and when they caught this disease they knew that this was God speaking to them and telling them something and somehow or other they worked out in their minds that it was wrong for them to take

Sarah into Pharaoh's palace and they worked out that Sarah wasn't Abraham's brother she was his wife and they went to him and they rebuked him for what he had done it must have been a terribly embarrassing thing for Abraham as a man of God to have been told how wrong he was by people who didn't know the living and the true God it's just as embarrassing when we go wrong isn't it when we fail when we bring about the surprise of people who we are supposed to be witnesses to these are the very people sometimes that rebuke us and tell us how wrong we are Pharaoh was surprised at Abraham I want to leave you with a question tonight if people around you people who aren't Christians if they were to find out I hope they know already but if they were to find out tomorrow that you are a Christian would it surprise them it's a very challenging question or would they say well it doesn't surprise me if that person's a Christian I can tell by the way he lives I can tell by the way he behaves I can tell by his honesty I can tell by his faithfulness I can tell by their conduct that that person it doesn't surprise me at all or would that person say a Christian I can't believe that I can't believe that anyone who behaved the way I have seen that person behaving would claim to be a Christian may Abraham's failure be a challenge to all of us this evening let's pray oh Lord our God the word speaks sharply to us in order for us to be restored and in order like Abraham that we might see by the error of our ways that God is the Lord who restores our soul and makes us to walk in the paths of righteousness and so Lord where we have failed we ask for forgiveness we ask oh Lord that we might be restored both in our relationship with yourself and in our witness to the world who need to see a faithful and a consistent testimony to the truth of God we ask these things in Jesus name Amen Amen