

Abram's story begins in Genesis 11 verses 27-31. Here we learn that Abram's father was Terah, named after a moon deity worshipped in Ur, and there is no indication that he ever turned to Yahweh. Abram married Sarai (later to be renamed Sarah) who was barren – which will become an important point later. The whole family set out from Ur for Canaan, but for some reason stopped half-way in Haran.

God didn't really want Abram to be in Haran, but in Canaan – so God called Abraham to leave his people and household and follow God's leading:

“The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go 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 peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.” (Genesis 12:1-4 NIV)

This sudden new beginning will be characteristic of the story of the Patriarchal Period. Abram commenced a life in which he was generally obedient to God, by fully responding to God's leading, although he did lapse into sinfulness on a number of occasions, as we shall see. God's command and His accompanying promises were to become the basis of a covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants. Abram is to be blessed and is to be a blessing to others. God has not yet made a covenant with him, that will come later, but the shape that covenant will take is already emerging.

Abraham's call is both dramatic and specific, and the sudden new beginning it gives him provides a model for the rest of Patriarchal History. Furthermore, the universal nature of the promised blessing in Genesis 12:3: “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”, gives us preview of the universal salvation that God was to provide. It also makes it clear that although the Israelites were to be special, God's chosen people, God's salvation was always to be universal – for all mankind. God gives each one of us a new beginning when we turn to Christ in faith.

It's evident that Abram's responding to God's call has dramatically increased his intimacy with God, because Abram communicates with God several times on his journey (Genesis 12:7-8). When we respond to God's call it always increases our intimacy with Him. But then comes a fall from grace as a famine causes Abram to enter into Egypt, and Abram, in fear, passes Sarai off as his sister rather than his wife (Genesis 12:13) - in fact she really was his half sister (Genesis 20:12). This results in Pharaoh taking Sarai for his wife, which in turn results in God bringing punishment on Pharaoh in the form of diseases (Genesis 12:17). Pharaoh now somehow learns the truth, rebukes Abram, and gives Sarai back to him along with material gifts.

So Abraham leaves Egypt, along with his brother Lot and his ill-gotten wealth and goes through the Negev to a place between Bethel and Ai (Genesis 13:3). Abram and Lot were unable to stay in the same place because they had too many flocks and herds, so they parted (Genesis 13:6). God then again spoke to Abram – note God is still using Abram in spite of his failures – and shows him the land he had already promised him:

“The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring for ever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.” (Genesis 13:14-17 NIV)

On their separation, Lot had gone to live in Sodom and when that city was attacked he was captured and carried off – but Abram rescued him (Genesis 14:1-16). As Abram is returning from this mission he meets with a man, a priest of God, who will later become of considerable importance – Melchizedek, a name which means “king of righteousness”.

Melchizedek blesses Abram:

“After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King’s Valley). Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.” Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.” (Genesis 14:17-20 NIV)

So we see that Melchizedek was king of Salem, a city traditionally identified with Jerusalem and Abram’s giving him a tenth of everything is the origin of our tithing. Certainly Melchizedek has the right perspective as he gives God the credit for Abram’s victory. Melchizedek now disappears from scripture until he resurfaces in Psalm 110 and in the book of Hebrews, where we are told that Christ is a high priest in the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:10). Of course, Christ could not be a high priest in the traditional sense, as he was in the line of Judah, whereas priests were in the line of Levi. But the book of Hebrews tells us that Christ was in an even more foundational priestly line, that of Melchizedek. Here we need to remember that Levi was not yet born, he was only in contemplation as a future descendant of Abram. So Melchizedek has precedence over Levi and thus the priesthood of Christ has replaced the Levitical priesthood.

Following this episode God again reveals himself one night to Abram and they have their first dialogue:

“..... the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.” Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.” He took him outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”” (Genesis 15:1-5 NIV)

In response to these promises Abram put his faith in God:

“Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6 NIV) This is the first time the idea of faith appears in scripture. This is supremely important because it leads us towards the doctrine of salvation by faith in God’s promises expressed in the salvific death of Christ on the cross.

God then proceeds to confirm his promises to Abram by making a covenant with him (Genesis 15:18). The idea of God’s dealings with us and His promises to us being expressed as covenants is hugely important, but there is a limit to what we can cover in one Teaching Morning, so I’m not going to focus on the idea of covenant today. Although I do want to point out that all God’s covenants with mankind were made entirely at God’s instigation and at times and on terms that were fully determined by God and were purely an expression of God’s grace towards us. Indeed mankind played no part at all in any of the covenants, other than the Sinai covenant, all the other covenants were promises made entirely and solely by

God. In addition to making the covenant with Abram, God also reveals the coming slavery of the Israelite nation in Egypt and his plan to rescue them:

“Then the LORD said to him, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions.” (Genesis 15:13-14 NIV)

God also reiterates his earlier promise from Genesis chapter 13 to give Abram’s descendants a land to live in and now tells him the extent of it:

“On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates— the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”” (Genesis 15:18-21 NIV)

this was the land of Canaan, the so called Promised Land.

In fact this promise was fully realised, but it only endured for a short time during the height of David’s reign and part of Solomon’s reign before the Israelites unfaithfulness to God started to bring about the collapse of their empire.

Abram had originally expressed faith in God’s promise to give him offspring, but Sarai remained childless and Abraham and his wife Sarai both became impatient and Sarai told Abram to conceive a child through her maidservant Hagar (Genesis 16:3) – which duly came to pass (Genesis 16:4). Just as Abraham had presented Sarai to Pharaoh, Sarai now presents Abram to Hagar. But Sarai became jealous and mistreated Hagar (Genesis 16:6). Hagar briefly fled the household until an Angel of the Lord told her to return and submit to Sarai (Genesis 16:9). Even Hagar receives a divine revelation. The Angel also told Hagar that she was pregnant and would have a son who was to be called Ishmael (Genesis 16:11).

Some time later, God confirmed his covenant to give Abraham offspring through Sarai and told Abram that his name was to be changed to Abraham and told Abraham that circumcision was to be a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham’s descendants:

“You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.” (Genesis 17:11 NIV)

At the same time, God changed Sarai’s name to Sarah (Genesis 17:15) which means “princess”. God then tells Abraham that Sarah will bear him a son, to be called Isaac, within the year and that Isaac, rather than Ishmael will be the beneficiary of God’s covenant:

“But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.”” (Genesis 17:21 NIV)

Abraham, his son Ishmael and all the men in his household were duly circumcised (Genesis 17:23) and the vision of a further son was duly confirmed by an Angelic visitation (Genesis 18:1-19).

Next we come to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, because they had become so wicked and here Abraham intercedes and pleads for God’s mercy for them – but I’m going to skip over that today.

Abraham moved on again and as he moved again passed his wife off as his sister (Genesis 20:2) – again with bad consequences – do we never learn? But then Sarah became pregnant by Abraham with the promised child, a male child who was to be called Isaac (which means “he laughs”), and she gave birth. Soon afterwards Ishmael mocked them (Genesis 21:9) and Sarah again caused Ishmael and his mother Hagar to be cast out of the household (Genesis

21:10) (even though she and any child she might bear should have been fully accepted in the household under the customs of those times). Hagar and Ishmael duly went on their way and survived as a separate family.

After several years God tested Abraham by calling on him to go and sacrifice his son Isaac: "Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." (Genesis 22:1-2 NIV)

Later in Levitical tradition the burnt offering would become an offering to be consumed whole by fire on the altar. Moriah, was, of course, the location of Jerusalem, the place where Temple sacrifices were carried out and the place where Christ was crucified. Abraham had already lost one child, was he now to lose another.

but Abraham duly went:

"Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about." (Genesis 22:3 NIV)

The site of the intended sacrifice is often identified as the eventual site of the Israelite Temple in Jerusalem. I don't think we should see this as either Abraham or God promoting child sacrifice, but rather we should see it as Abraham's extreme unquestioning obedience to God's will. We don't know what, if anything, Abraham and Isaac said to each other on the journey, scripture has not given us any record.

God pushed Abraham to the limit and Abraham went forward with the plans for the sacrifice until the 11th hour and the 59th minute:

"Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son." (Genesis 22:6-10 NIV)

Isaac carries the wood for the burnt offering, just as Christ carried his cross to Calvary. His question about the lamb for the burnt offering shows that he knows what is involved in this act of worship. Abraham must by now have had such a great faith in God that he believed God would resurrect Isaac from the dead in order that God's promises to Abraham concerning Abraham's descendants might be fulfilled. Isaac also displays great faith, he displays the faith that co-operates as he must have known that he was to be the offering when he was bound and laid on the altar and if he was old enough to carry the wood – he was probably a teenager by now – he would certainly have been strong enough to resist.

But at the last minute Abraham was released from his predicament:

"But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that

place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided." (Genesis 22:11-14 NIV)

God provides an animal as a sacrifice in substitution for Isaac, which prepares us for idea of Israelite substitutionary animal sacrifice, which was to be introduced later, and for the ultimate and final substitutionary sacrifice made on behalf of us all – Christ. The story also gives us a model of the sacrificial faith that God demands from his people and of God's provision for those who have faith in Him.

God repeats some of his covenant promises to Abraham, including the promise of universal blessing through his descendants:

".... "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me." (Genesis 22:16-18 NIV)

Some time later Sarah died and was buried in land Abraham purchased from the Hittites (Genesis 23). Even though Abraham has been promised this land in due course, he doesn't have it yet, and so he buys a plot from the current owners the Hittites. It's the only piece of land which Abraham comes to possess during his lifetime. It will be many years before his descendants gain the Promised Land.

So obedience to God's call and leading were key for Abraham and they are key for us today too. Look at what great and amazing things were emerging from Abraham's one initial small act of obedience to God's call. Note too how God can use us in spite of our flaws and failures. Abraham twice prostituted his wife to keep him out of danger, doubted God's provision to the extent that he made his own plan of having a child by a maidservant when God's plan took longer than he expected and then threw his mistress and child out of his house.