

The Faith of Father Abraham

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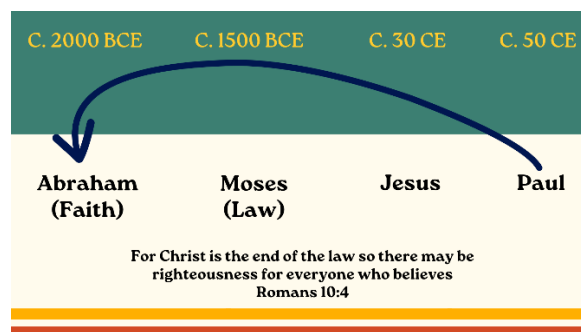
For the remainder of Lent I will be in the OT texts of the lectionary, because doing OT is my idea of fun. I love it. That is especially true when the OT passage for the week has a corollary in the NT, as it does today. We will always explore that and try to deepen our awareness of the interconnectedness the biblical history, what we might call the tapestry of truth.

The story of Abraham is contained in fifteen chapters in Genesis – 11-25. Abraham is the first person to appear in biblical history, that is, at a time and in a place that are known.

We know Abraham lived in Persia and that, generally, we can say he lived from somewhere just before 2000 BCE to just after, in a window of a few hundred years.

What is really arresting in reading our passages for today, is how Paul, in discussing the nature of saving faith in Romans, bases his understanding on the faith exemplified by Abraham.

My word of the week is for our kids who are with us this morning: What does the word “example” mean.



In fact, one of the more important observations we can make about the teachings of Paul’s theology is that he looks back over the figure of Moses and the Law, to the figure of Abraham, as the most important figure of the faith.¹

To make this point clear in his various writings, Paul does an extended treatment of the faith of Abraham in chapters 4 and 5 of Romans, and in various other places in Romans up to chapter 10.

He covers the same fundamental idea in Galatians 3, and you find rereading of Abraham’s faith, (specifically the quote of Gen 15), also throughout the Book of Hebrews, and in James 2:23.

I would call this a major rhetorical feature of Paul’s understanding of what constitutes saving faith.

Paul begins: ***We say, “Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.”*** (Romans 4:9b, quoting Gen 15:5-6)² Paul says, “We say...” Meaning, this is a tenant of the early Christian confession based on Christians *rereading the Abraham story in light of the resurrection.*

Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. (Romans 4:22-25)

In short hand, we are given to understand that New Testament faith, the faith that we are now to demonstrate in our lives to the Risen Jesus, is based on the essence of Abraham's faith, that is the example of how Abraham believed in God.

So, just to be clear. We don't ignore the law. Jesus said observe the law. The law of Moses is God's fundamental principle for human society. But since the resurrection of Jesus, it isn't what saves us.

For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.
(Romans 10:4)

Let's talk about Abraham's faith and what it is about it that makes it the foundation of Paul's theology...

He never lived to see the promises of God realized. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, tells the Abraham story this way just before he dies in Acts 7:

He quotes Genesis 12:1-4, our text for the today and then says:

He [God] did not give him [Abraham] any of it as a heritage, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as his possession and to his descendants after him, even though he had no child. (Acts 7:4-5)

Even though he never got one foot of the Promised Land, ***And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.*** (Genesis 15:5-6)

And even though he was advanced in years and had no son, God's promise was thus:

He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

And yet! ***And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.*** (Genesis 15:5-6)

Of all that he was promised, he actually received none of it in his lifetime, save one son.

And yet, Gen 12:3 tells that the blessing of all the families of the earth arises from this act of Father Abraham's faith. From this arises a great nation.

What is asked of us who believe? God asks for our trust.

What is easy about this kind of trust and what is hard about it?

Do you remember when, as a kid, you were running down the drive way and fell and scraped your knee? Where in all the world did you want to be in that moment? In your mother's arms.

Having Abraham faith isn't about believing harder, it's about releasing yourself into the arms of God. It is the place of unspeakable blessing in life. Releasing yourself into God's arms is the easiest thing to do. You are home.

What is hard. Well, there is no way around it. We are asked to demonstrate this faith before we have the actual evidence in hand. Like Abraham.

Hebrews describes that matter this way:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. (Hebrews 11:1-3)

All this is to say that Abraham faith is a fundamental definition of saving faith in the New Testament. Abraham faith.

From the Text

I have a couple of topical series I'm contemplating. Maybe sometime this summer I will do a series of three or four messages on *Curious Lines from the Creed*.

I should do a series on the *Great Misconceptions of the Faith*. If we could become more aware of the mistaken things people believe about the Christian faith, we would be better evangelists. Some examples...

- A loving God would never create a world so full of evil as our own. People say, 'Therefore, there is no God.'
- The one we touched on last week was that God is a violent, angry God, impatient to judge and quick to condemn. People say, 'I want nothing to do with this God!'

Today the misconception would be that it is what we believe with our brain that constitutes saving faith. People say, 'I can't accept Christian dogma intellectually in its entirety, so I can't have a relationship with Jesus.'

I studied apologetics under the redoubtable Norman Geisler. Indomitable. I'm still scared to death of him.

I have always had a problem with the apologetics project of the 20th century in that it was based on the premise that if you could convince people of, say, the historicity of the Jesus story, that they would come to saving faith.

Having faith doesn't mean convincing your mind something is true. In fact, we who believe have all kinds of doubts about all kinds of Christian beliefs.

"Having faith" in the biblical sense isn't a mental construct, it is the expression of confidence in God and God's provision for our salvation, demonstrated to perfection by Abraham, who got nothing of what was promised (he did finally get a son).

We are not asked to pluck one sentence from the Creed and then have our destiny based on it. It is the whole piece of cloth that says, 'I can accept that God's got this! God has my trust!'

For the redeemed this is easy. For the lost (in all the various meanings of that word) it is a step of faith.

If you are on the first steps of your journey of faith you might say, 'I want to explore this path and am open to learning about God's love for us.'

You don't have to know really much of anything to come to faith. When I was a scrawny young man on the Quadrangle at Idaho State in 1972 and asked Jesus into my heart, I didn't know anything.

You just have to draw near to God with humility and trust. Having saving faith in Jesus is a matter of the *heart*. Abraham is our example!

Look at what Paul actually says about saving faith:

“...because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. (Romans 10:8-10)

Our application for the day is to emulate the complete trust in God that our Father Abraham showed those 3000 years before now. God’s got this. Let us do our part and trust.

¹ The argument of Hebrews is that 1) Jesus is greater than Moses (Heb 3:3) and 2) Jesus is greater than Abraham, and argument put forward in great detail in Hebrews 7. This prepares the argument for the grand assertion of chapter 11 that we are saved, like Abraham, by faith.

² Quoted again in James 2:23; and just to be complete, see these texts for all the references to Gen 15:5-6 in the NT: Ro 4:3, 9, 18, 22; Heb 11:12; Gal 3:6; James 2:23.