

Abraham Friend of God - From Fear to Faith

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon explores Abram's journey from fear to faith as he navigates God's promise of a son and learns to trust in God's sovereignty.

Duration: 41:27

Scripture: Genesis 15:1-6, Matthew 6:33

Topics: "Abraham"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of recognizing the word of God as a personal message from Him. He warns against treating the Bible as just another book and encourages listeners to hear and heed the voice of God in His word. The speaker then focuses on the story of Abram in Genesis 15, highlighting the conflict in Abram's mind regarding his lack of an heir. God reassures Abram through a vision and object lesson, promising him a son from his own body. The sermon concludes by highlighting the journey from fear to faith that Abram experiences, ultimately leading to settled confidence in God's promises.

Transcript

Will you kindly turn in the scriptures to the book of Genesis, chapter 15, where we are going to read verses 1 to 6 as the basis of our meditation this morning. I shall read the passage from the New International Version. After this, 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 at the heavens and count the stars, if indeed you can count them.

Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be. Abram believed the Lord. Please notice that.

Abram believed the Lord, and he, that is the Lord, credited it to him as righteousness. This is a vitally important chapter in the progressive revelation of God. And that, of course, is a statement of the obvious.

Anyone aware of the progressive revelation as we have it in the Old Testament culminating in the New will understand that we are treading on very sacred ground just now. It records certain events and principles which were not only of the profoundest significance for Abram himself as the father of the faithful or the friend of God, but also to his spiritual seed throughout the ages. We are not surprised, therefore, to find that this passage and what is taught here figures as the background in a number of New Testament passages, in a number of key New Testament passages, such as Romans 4, Galatians 3, Hebrews 11 and James 2. Now we this morning are going to look at two things.

One, the initial conflict in Abram's mind as we come on to this scene in chapter 15, and then following that, the settled confidence that crept into Abram's heart as we come to the end of the passage. It is a pilgrimage, if you like, from fear to faith, or as I would rather put it, from inner conflict to settled confidence. Now let's look at the first, the conflict in Abram's mind.

Look at verses 1 to 3. Let's grasp this, it's very important, by way of a link with what went before and what Mr. McLeod was talking to us about from chapter 14, Last Lord's Day. After this, after all that happened in chapter 16 with that mighty victory over the confederacy of kings, after this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, and listen to what it says. Don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid. And that seems to take us by storm. This is the very moment when we wouldn't be expecting Abram to be afraid.

He's experienced one of the greatest victories in his life. But Abram was afraid. With all the great victory over the kings and then over himself, because he refused to take anything from the king of Sodom, even to a lachet of his shoes or a drink of water, as far as he was concerned.

He said, I don't want anything because I've sworn I'll not take anything from you, lest you turn up and say that you made me rich. Not anything do I want from you. You see, Abram had a spiritual victory as well as a military victory.

And then we come suddenly to this and we find that as God saw Abram, he was still trembling. He may have worn the face of a soldier, but at this moment he had the heart of a person who was afraid. Reassured by God that his unspecified fears were wholly groundless and unnecessary, Abram momentarily glosses over the reason that God gave him.

God says to him, don't be afraid, Abram, because I am your shield. And not only am I your shield, I am your very great reward. Now there are two thoughts lying there which are most precious that I cannot deal with.

I can only refer to them. God says to Abram, Abram, I am the shield standing between you and any possible harm. Any harm that comes to you has to come through me.

I'm standing on guard. I'm a wall around you. I'm your shield.

And before anything can touch you mentally, spiritually, physically, as a family, before anything can come to you, Abram, it's got to pass through me. I've got to allow it. And as if that were not enough, Abram, I want to tell you that I am your exceeding great reward.

If I allow anything to pass on to you in terms of suffering or loneliness or whatever, I want you to know, Abram, that it is only a channel in and through which I give you more of myself. If I permit you to be lonely,

if I permit you to go here to do that, if I permit this to happen to you and you don't explain it, Abram, just bear this in mind. I am your reward.

I'm finding a better way of giving more and more of myself to you. I'm your shield to keep things off that can bring you no good. And I am the one who is giving himself to you in the midst of the circumstances that I shall choose for you.

This is what Paul means when he says in Romans chapter 8 that all things work together for good to them that love God. God is not only a shield to keep away the things that cannot do us any good, but God is the one who can transpose the evil to work out his good purposes. Now, God told Abram that, but you know, it's funny, isn't it? Sometimes you don't hear what's told you because your heart and your mind are on other things.

And you've got one little problem in your mind and you miss a promise like this. And Abram had one problem in his mind at that particular moment so that, believe it or not, despite this marvelous promise, I suppose it's one of the most precious in Holy Writ, Abram didn't get the glory of it. As Abram saw it, there was reason for fear.

As Abram saw it, on the one hand, there was the amazing goodness of God. He couldn't deny that. The God who gave him victory over those five confederate kings, as recorded in the previous chapter, together with the incalculably precious promise just received, however much he has recognized of the value of that.

But now on the other hand, you see, there is this, and this is the thing that's coloring his mind and shaping his thoughts. He hasn't got a child. Sarah's barren.

And so many of the promises of God yesterday, even the promises that he has repeated about tomorrow, there's no possibility of their being fulfilled until Abram has a boy. Abram has a child. Sarah dandles a little one to her bosom.

They haven't a child. And because they haven't a child, you see, this one solitary experience casts its ugly cloud over everything that God has done for Abram and everything that God says to Abram. There's the basis of the conflict.

It is that God should have proved himself so wonderfully mighty and gracious on such a wide front, but on this key front, and it is a key front, he's so slow. Why doesn't he hurry up? If he means to give us a child, why doesn't he do so? Because the days are creeping in, and the years are passing on, and Sarah's barren, and it was hopeless from the beginning, but it's becoming ten times, a thousand times more hopeless as the days go by. The storm raged then around the apparent inconsistency between God's evident grace on so many fronts and this one thing that he just doesn't seem to do.

It seems as if God doesn't understand that this is so key to the situation, as man in his folly would say. Now, this is by no means a dead issue. I have no doubt at all if we were to talk heart to heart this morning, we would find that many of us are there.

If we dare give in to our feelings, many of us may be plagued by the very same kind of thing as we sit in this church this morning on this Thanksgiving, Lord's Day. You see, God has been too kind to us on a myriad levels, in a myriad ways. We can't deny his goodness.

Look at the clothes you wear, look at the food you eat, look at the homes you and I live in, look at the cars we drive in, look at what we have, look at the country round and about us, hear the birds sing, listen to the rippling brook. There are men and women in the world today who've never heard a rippling brook, who've never heard the birds sing, who've never seen the beauties of an Ontario. God has been so good to us on a thousand fronts.

And then there's this one thing that he said he would do and he's never done it. And it's the key to everything. And I just don't understand him.

Has he got a blind spot? Perish the thought. Why is he lingering? Then I think it's time he did something. Isn't that how we talk? Because of all that, we too, like Abram of old, are found making alternative arrangements in the event of God's failure.

You know, we're as crazy as crazy can be. We too are pointing to some Eleazar of Damascus, whom we anticipate to be the heir after us, when God has promised an Isaac. Now, let me explain just briefly here.

You see, in Abram's day, this is exactly what would have happened. He had a slave in his house, Eleazar from Damascus. I don't know how he got him from Damascus, never mind.

But here he was, Eleazar of Damascus. He was his slave. Now, in the event of there being no issue, no natural issue or adopted issue or adopted child, the natural thing to take place was that this slave, who had proved faithful, would inherit everything.

Now, Eleazar of Damascus was evidently a good slave. There's no question about that. He was a good man.

And perhaps, speaking humanly, he highly deserved anything that God or Abram could heap upon him. At least, nothing is said against him here. But you see what Abram is doing.

He's afraid that God is not going to keep his original promise, which seems too good to be true. And therefore, Abram is taking some steps to cover up. And so, if there's no Isaac coming, well, he'll fall back on Eleazar of Damascus.

And God may fulfill his promise through him. This is the cause of the rumbling in his spirit and the questioning in his mind of the conflict. And you know, the wonderful thing is that the story doesn't end there.

Neither need it end there for you and for me. Let's pass on to the second main strand woven into this rich tapestry of truth. The scene changes, the emerging confidence.

The word is faith, but I'm using the word confidence because we've become so accustomed to the word faith that really we don't see the glory of it, real faith. Faith is confidence, and that's why I use it now. We know what confidence is.

If somebody has no confidence in you, well, you know what that means. If somebody has confidence in you, that bolsters your ego and mind, doesn't it? We know what confidence is. Okay.

The emerging confidence in God. The scene changes then. The sun rises upon Abram again.

Faith comes to its own, and the spectacle is well worth seeing. It was placed on record, I believe, for our eternal prophet. Three things.

One, God rejected Abram's alternative. I'm referring to the alternative which fear and doubt, which are two close relations, had together suggested in place of what God had promised. It's not going to be Eleazar of Damascus who's going to be the heir, but the child out of your own body.

Let me read it. 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. God had to take away the second best which Abram's timidity was grasping at, as if the whole future depended upon that.

God had to take that away and say, Abram, no, not Eleazar. Pinning his hopes upon Eleazar was not God's plan. He had something far, far better for Abram and Sarai and for posterity.

And so the first thing that God has to do is to get his eyes away from Eleazar. God has always to get our eyes away from the props that we have made to replace God, or as eventualities in case God lets us down. To prove him in all his glory, those props have got to be taken away.

And that's part of the divine strategy in sicknesses and weaknesses and trials of this earthly life. It's to take away our props. Oh, the multitudes of men and women who have acted in the same kind of self-willed way as Abram, simply because they could not wait God's time.

Some of us may be there in precisely that situation this morning. And self-appointed alternatives, which fear and doubt have devised, simply have to be relinquished before we can experience the best that God has planned for us. Have you a self-chosen Eleazar? An insurance policy that is meant to come out just at the point when God will fail? Your Eleazar will not be accepted as an alternative for God's Isaac.

Whilst you are only throwing dust and confusion into your own eyes and mind by thinking that God's original promise, a promise that he made, clearly made, unequivocally made, unconditionally made, cannot be fulfilled. I want to stress this. It is very necessary for us always to remember that God never needs to revise his unconditional promises.

He may withhold his gifts, his promises, the fulfillment of the promises for a while, but he never revises his plans relative to his unconditional promises. God rejected Abram's alternative. He rejects mine.

He rejects yours too. They'll have to, and we'll have to put them one side. But now, the second thing.

God renewed his promises in still more specific terms than those previously employed in speaking to Abram. This is precious. God disqualifies this dear Eleazar of Damascus, this faithful slave.

God disqualifies him and says, look, there may be a place for you in my will, but this is not the place. You're not to be the heir of Abraham. Abram's heir is to be a special gift.

Look at verse 4. 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. The King James Version says, he that shall come forth out of your own bowels. A son coming from your own body.

What music those words must have conveyed to the consciously aging saint. His heir was not to be Lot, his nephew. We saw a little earlier that there was a tendency perhaps to believe that God would fulfill his promise through Lot.

Lot went out of the way. He separated from Lot. Now, when there was still no child coming into his own family, he thought of Eleazar of Damascus, his slave.

No, no, no. The heir is not to be Eleazar of Damascus, his slave either. God says no to both.

Perhaps the general nature of the promise given to Abram a little earlier on gave him leeway to doubt a little. The promise of God previously had been perhaps a little general. In chapter 12 and verse 7, God had said that he had referred to his seed and to his descendants and that such seed or descendants would become as great in number as the dust of the earth.

That's chapter 13 verses 15 to 16. Now, those terms were rather general. And maybe Abram had seen that they were a little bit general and was a bit afraid to turn the whole thing in upon his own situation and to see that he must be the father of the seed to whom God had referred.

Maybe that he was afraid to turn the general principle in upon himself as we so often are. To turn the vast general comprehensive principles of the word of God, turn them in upon ourselves and say, this applies to me. Perhaps the general nature of the promise then gave some room for Abram to wonder whether in the absence of a child by Sarai he should look elsewhere, but God had better things for him.

There is something at one and the same time comforting and humbling in the way God has to repeat his promise to Abram and spell it out a little more and make it more specific. You see, doubt so easily sets in. But what does God do when doubts come in, into the lives of his elect, his chosen ones, as Abram was? Does God abandon those whom he has called? Does God leave and forsake those whom he has chosen as he chose Abram? Does he leave them to fend for himself and withdraw and say, all right, Abram, I give you a good chance and I put you on the start of the race now.

If you can't go on yourself, I leave you to it. Is that our God? If it were, my friends, all of us would be in the mire this morning. Faith needs to be as divinely sustained all through to the end as divinely imparted or ignited at the beginning.

And what God does, you see, to deal with this man whose faith was lagging or lapsing or waning, I don't care what picture you use, what God does is this. He gives him a more specific promise. He brings him his promises.

And he presents him with a promise and a clearer promise. And he feeds him with a promise. And dear old Abram at last sees it.

This is what brings him to a point of crisis. God pursues the half-believing saint with his promises. And this is always the way to advance.

It's take the promises of God. Take the word of God, not as a dead mechanical word, but as the word of someone speaking. I find that there's a great difficulty here, you see.

These Bibles have been printed by machines, printing machines. And we tend to think of them as dead things, dead letters, dead books. And there is nothing which is more tragic to faith than this, that I should read the Bible as just a book that's come from the press.

It's not that, my friend. Curse the press if we're going to look upon it like that, precious though its value may be. This is God's speech.

This is a personal message. This is God speaking. This is God addressing us.

And if we do not hear the voice of God, the speech of God, the word of God, God speaking in his word, well, we'll soon either become bibliolators or heaven knows what. We need to hear and heed the voice of God and know that it is always in his word to be heard. He is still speaking in the word in which he has once spoken.

That brings me to the last point. Having rejected Abram's alternative to the seed of promise, renewed his own promise very specifically, God graciously reassured his servant by giving him a second object lesson. Does God give you object lessons? I hope he does.

Though their need is not quite as great now as in the days of old, and perhaps, generally speaking, this kind of object lesson may not be as relevant today or as needed today with our full text and canon of scripture as in Abram's day. But look at what God did for Abram. It was night.

At least in Abram's vision, according to the first verse, if not in fact, the Lord took the reassured man outside the tent and bade him look up at the sky, studded with a myriad stars, smiling in solemn silence upon Abram and the world around him. And then God said to him, he must have felt stupid, God said to him, Abram, count the stars. Now, this is not a hobby with him.

Don't know whether he ever tried it before. But the voice of God came to him, Abram, look up, count the stars. Me, count the stars, what for? What do you want me to count the stars for? I can't add to them, I can't take away from them.

Why should I count the stars? Abram, count the stars. What a strange task to be given. And evidently there must have been a long pause during which Abram was looking up and wondering what to do, where to start and how to end the business.

Where do the stars begin and where do they end? And we got them all in and I don't know how far he went. But of course the whole point of it, the whole point of the exercise was to prove to him that he couldn't do it. Because the Lord says to him, as the numbers of the stars cannot be counted, cannot be counted, neither will the number of your seed be counted in due course.

The wonder of it began to dawn upon Abram at last. Just as on an earlier occasion God had said to Abram, his seed would be as countless as the dust of the earth. Chapter 13, verse 16.

See, God wants to get this message right across. As countless as the dust of the earth. So now he resolutely reaffirms that the seed will emerge from Abram's own body, will be countless as the stars above.

So whether you look down upon the dust under your feet or upwards to the sky at night, there are testimonies to the multitudes that will proceed out of your own body. Now we shall not pause to consider whether the one reference to the stars, for example, is to Abram's spiritual seed and the dust a reference to his natural seed. Actually the Bible mixes the metaphors.

It uses the one for the other. I don't need to go into the details. The fact is that Abram was given countless natural seed according to Deuteronomy 1, 10 and elsewhere, as well as a multitude which no man can number out of every kindred and tribe and people and nation to be his spiritual seed and to come and sit down with Abram and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of God.

Matthew 8, 11. The consequences of that divine object lessons were profound and far-reaching. Abram seems to have got the point at last.

And if you can only see it at this point, at this stage, when the message gets through, that he can't count the number of the stars, yet he's going to have more seed than the stars in number. And as it begins to come home, we read, Abram believed the Lord. Now if some of the translators of the Hebrew at this point, if they are right, then there is a very suggestive translation, and it should go like this, Abram steadied himself upon God.

Now I really like that. Because, you see, this is how Abram was. God had given a promise and he was staggered by the promises.

And he was staggering a little bit, spiritually, if not physically. He was tottering. What on earth do you make of a promise like this? And I haven't got a child.

And you can understand it, can't you? The man is flummoxed, as we say. Can you use that word here? Well, if you don't, get to know it. He was completely outwitted.

He didn't know what was happening. But now, at last, the message is coming through. And he steadied himself, leaning upon the Lord which spoke.

The Lord of all creation, El Elyon, Jehovah, Elohim, the great God of creation, and the great God of the covenant, and the great God of history, the Lord God Almighty. Abram leaned upon him and said, I rest in you. And God counted it to him for righteousness.

This was Abram's moment of justification. Now, this is said in the New Testament. This is where the New Testament makes use of this passage.

Abram believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness. Abram became a justified soul at this time. Now, someone may say, well, I'm terribly confused.

God called Abram of old, and he came out from Ur of the Chaldees, and he obeyed and went a thousand miles, settled down in Haran. God called him again, and he came. God revealed himself to him again.

Is this the moment of his justification? Well, it would seem so. The point is, you see, that all these other elements were aspects of God's grace, his prevenient grace, his preparatory grace, grace leading up to great grace, grace leading up to saving grace. But it was at this point, apparently, that he became a justified man before God, and God counted his faith equal to his righteousness.

Isn't this a very precious thing this morning? Oh, there are so many lessons here on this Thanksgiving morning. You and I know something of the faithfulness of God, but is there something in our heart of hearts concerning which we just cannot trust? Our God is far too slow for our liking. This passage says to us that it is better to wait God's time than to try and force the issue.

Abram will have to learn this lesson again. When we read this passage, we think he's really got it at last. I'm sorry to have to tell you he didn't get it at last.

And by the aid of his not-quite-believing wife, he tried another means. We shall come to that later on. But the fact of the matter is this.

For the moment, Abram was trusting in the Lord, and God, in mercy, responds and says, I count this to you as your righteousness. Is there someone here this morning who would want to be righteous, to be right with God? There never was a more blessed, more perfect illustration of it than this. Is there someone among us this morning who has come in, and really you know that in your heart of hearts, this season of the year makes you more conscious of it than perhaps any other, the goodness of God to you, brings out from your soul a sense of total unworthiness.

Why am I kept in life? Why am I provided for? Why do I see yet another harvest time in these parts of the world? Why should I? And I'm a rebel against the throne of God. And every gift He gives me, I misuse. Why should He care for me? You need to be justified, to use the Pauline phrase.

You need your sins to be forgiven you, and you need righteousness so that you can be accepted by God on the basis of justice. There's only one way. Steady yourself on the Lord.

Listen to His promises. Let them come through. And then feed upon them, and repeat them to yourself, and say, man, woman, these are for you.

I will believe. I do believe that Jesus died for me. I will believe.

I'll trust my God. The Bible tells us that this is justifying faith. Whom thus trust in the faithful God and His faithful promises cannot, cannot be lost.

I covet, therefore, for God's glory this morning, something like Abram's faith in my own heart and in yours, dear people. Oh, it is good that we should bring our offerings and our thanksgiving offerings. It is good.

It is great. It is wonderful. It is of a peace, surely, with the will of God.

But there is something more that is required of us. And that is that we should bring our confidence in God, born out of His faithfulness, born out of His Word, repeated and reiterated a thousand times, and sealed with the blood of Christ and His resurrection and ascension and the coming of the Spirit. Let us have faith in God.

Let us pray. Oh, Lord God Almighty, faithful, faithful under all circumstances, though we so often doubt, we bemoan our doubts, we confess our sins, we acknowledge the carnality of our most spiritual efforts. Yet, oh God, we thank You that because Jesus died, You forgive us.

And He was raised again for our justification. And by trusting in Him, we have righteousness that makes us acceptable in Your holy eyes. Oh, to be clothed in Him.

Oh, to have confidence in Him. In a world that believes not. Through Jesus Christ we pray.

Amen.

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