

The Greatest Story Ever Told

A Back-to-Basics Catechesis

The Call of Abraham

As we have seen, human sinfulness has made a real mess of things, before the flood and after. What is God going to do? God is going to choose a people, the Jewish people, and work with them over centuries to prepare them for the coming of a savior, Christ Jesus. Jesus will save not only them, but all the nations. God begins to form this people in the call of Abraham.

One of the beautiful things about the Bible is that it does not present epic figures who never fell. Many people think of Abraham the perfect of faith! Well, that was true eventually, but Abraham had some very bad moments in his journey that we ought not to overlook. Surely, he became strong in faith, but only after some bad falls along the way. Let's consider the call of Abraham and some of his struggles.

Abraham's kin are traced back to Ur, a city in ancient Babylon (modern Iraq). He was a descendent of Noah. In the aftermath of the tower of Babel, and likely due to religious controversies, he moved north and west to the city of Haran (in modern Syria).

Imperfect Initiation

God called Abram (called Abraham later) and was told, *"Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you"* (Gen 12:1). And he does! On one level this is remarkable because God didn't give him any directions; He just said, go, and Abram went forth, trusting that God would direct him. Notice a little

detail, though, that amounts to a lack of total obedience: *Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him* (Gen 12:4). How did his nephew Lot get included? Some may argue that this is no big deal, but for the record, God did not mention Lot in His instructions to Abram. Sure enough, Lot's presence causes trouble later. There is always trouble lurking when we do not obey God completely.



Wayward Wanderer

Abram gets to the Holy Land and God shows him its beauty. He reconnoiters the land and eventually pitches his tent near Bethel, a name that means "house of God." So, there he is right where he ought to be: in the House of God, on the Land God showed him (*cf* Gen 12:5-9)! There is only one problem: there is famine in the land. Will Abram trust God, who called him to this land? No! He goes off to Egypt (Gen 12:10). As such he is trusting Pharaoh—not God—to feed him. God never said, "Go to Egypt." It is quite ironic that Abram leaves a place

called Bethel (house of God) to go to the house of Pharaoh.

Fearful Foolishness

In Egypt, Abram does something awful. His wife Sarai (only called Sarah later in the narrative) is very beautiful; Abram is worried that men will want her and thus kill him, her husband, so that they can have her. Abram lies and claims that Sarai is his

sister; he convinces her to say the same (Gen 12:11-13). Abram even goes so far as to place her in Pharaoh's harem (Gen 12:14-16). This is to protect his own hide and to gain influence. Let's just make it plain: he "pimps out" his own wife! Pharaoh eventually discovers the lie and, suffering its consequences (severe plagues), denounces Abram: The LORD, however, afflicted Pharaoh and his household with severe plagues because of Abram's wife Sarai. *So Pharaoh summoned Abram and asked, "What have you done to me? Why didn't you tell me*

she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her as my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!" (Gen 12:17-19). In effect, Pharaoh fears God more than he does Abram. Sadly, it takes Pharaoh to get Abram to go back to where he belongs in Bethel (the House of God).

Confusing Consequences

At least Abram is back where he needs to be, in Bethel, right? Well, now the mistake of taking his nephew Lot manifests itself. Abram and Lot did quite well in Egypt; they came back to the Holy Land and Bethel

with flocks so large that the land cannot sustain them both together (Gen 13:1-8). Notice that Holy Land could sustain Abram, but not Abram and Lot together. This harkens back to the original disobedience of Abram in bringing Lot in the first place. Lot and Abram agree to part company, and Lot picks the choicer part of the land (where the Dead Sea is now) (Gen 13:8-12). Problem solved, right? Not exactly. The text says that Lot *pitched his tent toward Sodom* (Gen 13:12). You know where all that is going to lead! In the end, it will be another distraction for Abram, who brought Lot along when he shouldn't have. Lot shows bad judgement; he shouldn't be associating with the wicked in Sodom and Gomorrah. All this draws Lot into a big mess in which his family is corrupted. Lot's wife gets attached to the wicked place and cannot turn her back on Sodom. She looks back and is killed, becoming a pillar of salt. Lot's daughters, infected with the immorality of Sodom, later trick him into incest and he impregnates them (Gen 19:30ff). All of this is a distraction for Abram, who should never have brought Lot along in the first place.

Faltering Faith

God promises Abram and Sarai many descendants, but both falter in faith several times with regards this. Abraham's first struggle comes when, after many years of promises from God, no child has yet been born. Abram says "... *what good will your gifts be, if I keep on being childless and have as my heir the steward of my house, Eliezer? ... [Y]ou have given me no offspring, and so one of my servants will be my heir.*" God responds, "*No, that one shall not be your heir; your own issue shall be your heir*" (Gen 15:1-4). Later, Sarah, also despairing that God can ever deliver on His promise, suggests adultery to Abraham, and proposes

that he sexually exploit Hagar, her slave girl, and have a child by her. And he does! (Gen 16:1-4) Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, setting off ugliness between Hagar and Sarah (Gen 16:4-6). God once again must rebuke Abraham and remind him of His promises. Later, Sarah, paranoid over Hagar's exalted position as the mother of Abraham's first-born child, demands that Abraham commit an act of great injustice and drive Hagar and Ishmael into the desert (Gen 21:9-14). And he does!



Derisive Doubt

God renews His promises to Abram and Sarai and changes their names (to Abraham and Sarah) by entering a covenant with them (Gen 17:1-15). As God renews His promises for many descendants, Abraham prostrates himself and laughs (Gen 17:17). Later, Sarah laughs at the promise as well (Gen 18:12). Finally, Sarah gives birth to Isaac (a name that means "He laughs"), which commemorates the struggle of Abraham and Sarah to believe what God told them.

Abraham's journey was marred by some ugly setbacks, but ultimately

Abraham *did* come to believe God. He receives the fruit of faith in his son Isaac.

A Final Test

God prepares one final test to strengthen Abraham's faith (Gen 22). He tells him to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice! This time, Abraham does not hesitate. He sets out for Moriah, determined to obey God. Isaac asks, *Where is the lamb for sacrifice?* (Gen 22:7) Abraham has finally made it to faith; he simply responds, *God himself will provide the lamb for the sacrifice* (Gen 22:8).

Abraham has arrived. He has come to trust God and knows that obeying Him will not be without its reward. And God *did* provide the lamb, as you well know.

Abraham didn't simply "have faith." He had to get there through years of struggle, setbacks, and hard lessons. He had to learn that to obey God brings blessings, but to disobey God brings trouble. Abraham learned that God means exactly what He says and that he should trust Him in all things. If Abraham, the great hero of faith, had to go through all of this to arrive at faith, maybe there is

hope for us! We, too, are summoned to learn of faith and grow in it. We are called to obey more and more perfectly and to stop trying to improve on God's plan. Abraham's example isn't just a relief for us who struggle; it is also a road map, telling us what we must do. Faith has to grow, and we have to let it.

At this point in our story, God has initiated his plan by calling together a people, Abraham and his descendants. They will later be called Israel, the Jewish people. With this people God will work closely, teaching them, giving them the Law, sending them prophets and from them Jesus our Messiah shall come.