

## **Genesis 15:6**

**Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.**

One of the key questions that Christians need to be able to answer is:

- How were people in the Old Testament made right with God?
- Because so many people go wrong on the New Testament answer
- We ought not to be so surprised when they get the Old Testament answer wrong
- How are people in the New Testament made right with God?
- Answer: by faith
- How are people in the Old Testament made right with God?
- Answer: by faith
- Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6)

Following the account of the great flood (a Bible story often referred to as Noah's Ark)

- The Bible records that God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them
- Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth (Genesis 9:1, 7)
- Chapter 10 deals with the genealogy of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth
- It is important to notice that the account of the building of Babylon and the tower
- Comes right in the middle of the lists that form chapters 10 and 11
- In the family trees there are two lines of descent
- One that starts with Shem and goes through Eber and Joktan
- Which is followed by the story of Babylon and the Tower of Babel
- And the other that starts with Shem and goes through Eber and Peleg
- Which is followed by the story of the call of Abraham
- So the Tower of Babel is one half of a story of contrasts
- The Babel half describes what happens when a community goes away from God
- But the Abraham half is a story of faith (which includes questions and mistakes)

Following the story of the Tower of Babel comes the genealogy from Shem to Abram

- It is from Shem that we get the description 'Semitic'
- More detail is given from 11:27 onwards with regard to Abram's father, Terah
- And Abram's younger brothers Nahor and Haran
- Abram and his wife Sarai had no children
- In obedience to God they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan
- A territory that would later be known as the Promised Land
- Because God had promised:

"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."

(Genesis 12:2-3)

After a period of wandering

- Abram, whose name was later changed to Abraham, lived at Hebron
- It was here that the great covenant was established
- Later Abraham lived in the Negev
- And the covenant was renewed at Beersheba

Abraham is one of three great figures in the Old Testament

- The others being Moses (through whom the Law was given)
- and David (the one great king of the united kingdom of Israel)
- Abraham was the great father of Israel (the seed of Abraham)
- And the God of Israel is often referred to as the ‘God of Abraham’

Abraham believed in one God, he believed God to be:

- The possessor of heaven and earth (Genesis 14:22, 24:3)
- The sovereign judge of the nations (Genesis 15:14)
- Lord of all the earth (Genesis 18:25)
- The disposer of the forces of nature (Genesis 18:14, 19:24, 20:17)
- Exalted (Genesis 14:22) and eternal (Genesis 21:33)

Abraham believed that God was a God of:

- Justice (Genesis 18:25), Righteousness (Genesis 18:19), Faithfulness (Genesis 24:27)
- Wisdom (Genesis 20:6), Goodness (Genesis 19:19), Mercy (Genesis 20:6)

Because of the prolific writing of the Wesleys, where the hymns of Charles

- Are universally accepted to be some of the best, if not the best in the English language
- Some of the other early Methodist hymn-writers are forgotten
- One of these, Thomas Olivers, wrote, ‘The God of Abraham praise’
- The five verses that we sing today are just five from the original twelve
- In which the writer, one of John Wesley’s travelling preachers
- Sets out the gospel and the plan of redemption, exalting and glorifying Jesus
- Much as I like modern worship songs, there is no substitute for this
- Converted under the preaching of the great evangelist, George Whitefield
- Thomas Olivers paraphrased a Jewish *Yigdal* (doxology, as we would say)
- Abraham’s God was his God, and his God is our God – he concludes:

Hail, Abraham’s God, and mine!  
I join the heavenly lays;  
All might and majesty are thine,  
And endless praise.

(HP 452)

Abraham demonstrated his faith in generosity, fidelity and hospitality

- And despite his questionings and mistakes
- He was in effect ‘preaching beforehand, the Christian gospel
- That would embrace all families of the earth

Consider Abraham: “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

(Galatians 3:6-9)

It is those who believe who are children of Abraham – children born by faith

## I ABRAHAM: PATRIARCH

After God commanded him to leave his native country, people and father's household

- And promised to make him a great nation and to bless him
- To make his name great and to make him a blessing
- So that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him
- Abram left, as the Lord had told him, and his nephew, Lot, went with him
- They set out for the land of Canaan and they arrived there
- (no 40 years of wandering in the wilderness for Abram, who believed and obeyed)

Abram travelled in the land of Canaan as far as the great tree of Moreh at Shechem

- here the Lord appeared to Abram and promised to give the land to his seed
- so Abram built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him
- later he pitched his tent between Bethel and Ai (Genesis 12:8)
- built an altar, called on the name of the Lord and went to the Negev (Genesis 12:9)
- These are journeys that will later be followed by Jacob (Genesis 33:18-20)
- Who purchased part of a field at Shechem and erected an altar to the God of Israel
- Before he left Shechem his household put away all foreign god and idols are buried
- From there he journeyed to Bethel and set up a pillar to the glory of God (35:4, 14-15)
- Finally he journeyed south, which is the Negev, and came to Hebron
- The patriarchs claimed the land given by God which will be conquered under Joshua

This can seem like detail that is purely academic and perhaps not greatly relevant to us

- but we need to remember that God called Abram to obey him and to be saved
- in the midst of judgment for the call of Abram, like Noah, marks a new beginning
- some people wrongly think that God is not a God of judgment
- other people think that God's judgment will only come at the end of time
- Abram was called by God, to obey him and to be saved, in the midst of judgment
- And God's call to obey him and to be saved comes to us today
- It comes in the midst of judgment – a symptom of our upside down way of thinking
- Is that when things go wrong – people ask why does God allow things to go wrong?
- Instead of thinking – in the face of all our sin why does God keep most things right?

As Adam was shown to be the father of the first people

- Who like their father fell into doubt, disobedience and sin
- So Abram is shown to the father of a new people
- Who like their father will follow a way of believing, obedience and righteousness
- It marks a return to God's original plan of blessing for 'all mankind' (Genesis 1:28)

Great attention is given to the 'seed of Abraham' sometimes translated 'descendants'

- the identity of the 'seed of Abraham' is one of the chief themes of Genesis
- Especially the later chapters, after Isaac, Jacob and Joseph
- At the close of the book, a glimpse of the future seed is briefly allowed
- He is the lion of Judah (Genesis 49:8) – the sceptre of kingly rule is his
- He will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes
- The obedience of the nations is his (Genesis 49:10)

As well as being one of the founding fathers of the people of Israel (a patriarch):

## II ABRAHAM: PROPHET

Despite the problems Abraham had when he tried to pass his wife off as his sister in Egypt

- Abraham makes the same mistake with Abimilech the King of Gerar
- And when God came to Abimilech in a dream
- He says that Abraham is a prophet (Genesis 20:7)
- Something which has been set out clearly in chapter 15

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 up 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, and he credited it to him as righteousness. He also said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”

(Genesis 15:1-7)

The central subject of this chapter deals with events that lie far in the future

- After Abram had offered sacrifices and the sun was setting, he fell into a deep sleep

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. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here.

(Genesis 15:12-16)

Like generations of prophets after him, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision

- Despite his many questions, Abraham remains a man of unwavering faith
- He believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness
- It is because he believed God and trusted him that he is made right with God
- How are the people in the Old Testament made right with God?
- By believing him, by hearing and obeying his word, by faith
- What God has said will happen will not come to pass for hundreds of years
- The whole narrative reminds us that God’s time is different from our time
- But God will be faithful to his promises – it is a word of hope and consolation to us
- We live in an age of many challenges and discouragements but God is faithful

He was a patriarch (a founding father of Israel) and a prophet, Abraham believed God

### III ABRAHAM: PROMISES

There are several times in the Old Testament where the promises of God are restated

- And several times where God's apparent delay in fulfilling his promises is considered
- Like later generations, Abraham must wait in faith for God's promises to be fulfilled
- The writer to the Hebrews records a great list of heroes of faith including Abraham

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith Abraham, even though he was past age - and Sarah herself was barren - was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.

(Hebrews 11:8-13)

It is easy to be impatient and to think that God has to act on our timescale

- But we must remember that this present 'age of grace'
- In which men and women still have time to respond to God in faith
- Is not God being slow in the way that some people understand slowness
- Rather it is God being patient with us not wanting any to perish
- But everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:4, 9)

From all the circumstances around him

- Abraham had reason to fear that God's promises would not be fulfilled
- Abraham was still childless - but God confirmed his promises would be fulfilled
- If God created the number of the stars in heaven
- He would also be able to give Abraham an equal number of 'offspring'
- God's faithfulness in the past was made the basis of Abraham's trust for the future

Abram believed the Lord and was accounted righteous (Genesis 15:6)

- It was not God's covenant or promise that made him righteous
- But through his faith he was counted righteous
- Faith is a decisive factor in God's dealings with Abraham's seed
- The passage continues with an account of the renewal of the covenant
- And the dramatic restatement of the promises of God, (Eden restored)

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. 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”

(Genesis 15:17-18)

It is faith in the promises of God that will later enable Paul to make the contrast

- Between those who are made right with God by believing what was heard
- And those who are wrongly trusting in observing the law and good works

The contemporary challenge is to those who think they are somehow made right with God

- By baptism – be that a small or large quantity of water, a baby or an adult
- Paul shows that Abraham may have been given a covenant sign (circumcision)
- But even Abraham was blessed through faith and not circumcision
- Since Abraham was saved by faith, his true children are saved by faith, as he was
- Interestingly enough, in the expression ‘the scripture foresaw’ (Galatians 3:8)
- Paul uses ‘scripture and God’s word’ interchangeably
- Pointing to the total inspiration and authority of the Bible
- Abraham was blessed as one who had faith
- How the could the nations of the world (Gentiles) be blessed except by faith

It is not palatable to believe that the world is under God’s judgment and wrath

- But just as Abraham was called to believe from a people under judgment
- So men and women are called to believe today
- But we are called with a much clearer vision – mercy in the work of Christ
- It is by faith that we are able to stand in a right relationship with God
- Paul reminds his readers of the covenant

In Abraham’s day an oath was sometimes confirmed by a ceremony

- in which animals were cut into two parts and placed in two rows
- The parties walked together into the space between the parts made promises
- This oath would be especially sacred because of the shed blood
- God enacted this ceremony with Abraham though God alone passed through the space
- For he alone stood behind the covenant – a covenant perfectly fulfilled in Christ
- So that for the Apostle Paul, ‘faith’ is clearly ‘faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour’

It is through faith in Christ that all who believe become ‘sons of God’

- For a true son of God is one who is justified by faith in Jesus Christ
- And who therefore passed into a new and right relationship with God
- A person who is no longer under law but under grace
- A transforming identification with Christ that is signified by baptism
- But no one is saved by baptism – that is simply an outward and visible sign
- But the inward change is effected by faith, by which all who believe become one
- In Christ is fulfilled all that was promised to Abraham
- Abraham the patriarch, the founding father of Israel
- Abraham the prophet, to whom God spoke
- Abraham to whom God promised that by his offspring all nations would be blessed