

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## Part 4 – The Old Covenant I - God's People

### Key Questions:

- What is true faith in God like? How can God accept sinful people on the basis of faith?
- If God loves people of all nations, why does most of the Bible focus so much on just one nation?

### Abraham's relationship with God

#### God calls Abram to follow Him (Genesis 11:27-12:9)

Abram was born in Ur, but when he was young his father, Terah, planned to take his family to Canaan. For an unknown reason they stopped half-way, in a place called Haran. The people of Ur worshipped many gods, but Abram's family knew about the true God. God spoke directly to Abram, calling him to leave his home to go to a land He would give him. God made three promises to Abram: to make Abram's name great and make his descendants into a great nation (12:2), to make Abram a blessing to other people (12:3), and to give the land of Canaan to Abram's descendants (12:7a). Abram did exactly what God said and left the town of Haran. His nephew, Lot, went with him. Abram was following the "way of faith", just as Abel and Noah had. He called on God's name and worshipped Him by sacrifice (12:7-8).

#### God accepts Abram because of his faith (Genesis 15:1-21)

The Bible records Abram's story honestly, including his faults. How was God able to work through Abram even though he made many mistakes? The answer is found in verse 6, which is one of the most important verses in the Bible:

*Abram believed God, and He credited it to him as righteousness*

God had already promised that Abram would have many descendants, but this seemed impossible because at this point He still had no children (verse 2)! God again promised that Abram's descendants would be very numerous (verse 5). Because it was God who promised it, Abram believed His words, even though he was already quite old (verse 6). Abram made a sacrifice again to God (verse 10), showing His faith in Him. God told Abram in a dream (verses 13-16) that a time would come when Abram's descendants would be badly treated as slaves in a foreign country for 400 years.

#### Abram and Sarai disobey God – Ishmael is born (Genesis 16)

In chapter 16 we read about a time when Abram acted not in faith but in disobedience to God. Abram's wife, Sarai, did not believe that God would fulfil His promise through her, and so she gave her Egyptian slave, Hagar, to Abram as a partner. Abraham was already 85 years old, and childless. Sarai's plan was that they would build a family through Hagar (verse 2). When Hagar became pregnant it caused great problems between her and Sarai. Hagar despised her mistress, and Sarai blamed Abraham. Abraham refused to intervene, and Sarai mistreated Hagar. Hagar ran away, but God protected her and told her to return to her mistress, promising that Hagar's descendants would be many (verse 10), and giving her a name for her son (verse 11). The problem with Sarai and Abram's action was that they decided that God needed their help to work out His promise to Abram. Instead of trusting God, they tried to fulfil His promise their own way. This was a big mistake, and although God did bless Ishmael, the promise of God could not continue through him.

#### God makes His Covenant with Abram and changes his name (Genesis 17:1-22)

God had already made three promises to Abram on two occasions: that he would have many descendants who would form a great nation (Genesis 12:2; 15:5), that others would be blessed through his descendants (Genesis 12:2; 15:5) and that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:7; 15:7). He now confirmed these promises in a covenant:

<b>Made with:</b>	Abram – whose name was changed to Abraham (verse 5)
<b>The promise:</b>	Many descendants, blessing to other nations & possession of Canaan (verses 6-8)
<b>Rule(s):</b>	His male descendants must be circumcised (verse 10)
<b>The sign:</b>	Circumcision (verse 11)

To mark this covenant relationship, God gave Abram a new name. The change of name was significant: Abram means "exalted father", but Abraham means "father of many". Sarai's name was changed to Sarah.

#### The birth of Isaac and a split in Abraham's family (Genesis 21:1-20)

Finally, when Abraham was 100 years old his son was born to Sarah. They named the child Isaac, which means "he laughs" because they laughed for joy at the birth of a child to such an elderly couple and expected everyone else to laugh too (verse 6). Unfortunately, Sarah became jealous of Hagar and Ishmael after her own son Isaac was born, and she insisted that Abraham should send Hagar and Ishmael away (verses 8-10). This caused a separation between Isaac and Ishmael that continues even to today between their descendants, the Jews and Arabs. God continued to protect Ishmael (verse 20), but he married an Egyptian wife and the descendants of the two sons grew further apart.

#### God tests Abraham's Faith (Genesis 22:1-18)

God asked Abraham to do the unthinkable – to kill Isaac as a sacrifice to Him (verse 2). Would Abraham be prepared to give the most precious thing he had for God? This story teaches us much about Abraham's faith:

1. *Abraham obeyed God* – faith is not just agreement with the mind, but it leads to obedience with the will and actions
2. *Abraham trusted God to save Isaac* – this incident was a test of Abraham's faith (verse 12). Abraham's willingness to give the most precious thing he had to God showed that his faith was true. True faith does not hold anything back from God. In the New Testament (Hebrews 11:17-19) we discover that Abraham was so sure that God would keep His promise to give him descendants through Isaac that he believed that God could raise Isaac back to life.
3. *Sacrifice is necessary* – God provided a ram to die in Isaac's place. This is a reminder to us that God's covenant depends on sacrifice and that we need His forgiveness. The ram is a picture of the perfect sacrifice that was to come.

## Abraham's Descendants (Genesis chapters 24-50)

The remainder of Genesis tells the story of how God protected Abraham's family and began to form a great nation from them. Abraham's family was marked by conflict in every generation and by examples of both disobedience and faith:

**Isaac and Ishmael** – It was through Isaac, not Ishmael, that God continued His covenant relationship with Abraham's descendants. Abraham found Isaac a wife (Rebekah) from his own home country and they continued to live in the land of Canaan. God blessed Isaac greatly (26:12) and he lived at peace with other peoples in Canaan (26:31).

*Ishmael represents the way of disobedience and Isaac represents the way of faith*

**Jacob and Esau** – these were the twin sons of Isaac. Their personalities and interests were very different. Esau was the older twin, but he rejected God by treating his birthright with contempt and marrying wives who had no respect for his parents or for God (26:34-35). He became the ancestor of the nation of Edom, which became an enemy of the nation of Israel. Jacob was a deceiver who tricked Esau out of his birthright (25:27-34) and later out of Isaac's blessings (chapter 27). However, his life was changed through two amazing encounters with God:

- a) *He wrestled with God* (32:22-32) – God began to change this deceiver into a man who would trust in Him. God told Jacob that He would change his name to Israel, which means "God struggles".
- b) *God gave the covenant promises to him* (35:1-15) – God made it clear that Jacob's descendants (the nation of Israel) would carry on the covenant relationship with Him.

*Esau represents the way of disobedience and Jacob represents the way of faith.*

**The twelve sons of Jacob** – Joseph was his father's favourite and his brothers hated him and sold him as a slave. He ended up in Egypt, where through an amazing sequence of events God eventually made him the chief ruler of Egypt under Pharaoh. He was able to use this position to rescue his brothers and their families from a famine in Canaan, and to show them that God is in control (50:20). Jacob's twelve sons became the ancestors of twelve tribes within the nation of Israel.

*Joseph represents the way of faith and his brothers the way of disobedience.*

Genesis ends with Abraham's descendants (now known as the "People of Israel") living in Egypt, not in the land God had promised them (Canaan). God's promises to Abraham were not complete, and His Kingdom had not been established – God had called his own people (the nation of Israel), but they were not in His place under His rule.

## Why did God choose one special nation?

As we read about Abraham with his great faith and the promise of a land for His descendants to live in we may wonder if this would be the way in which God planned to restore His kingdom. The pattern for the Kingdom can be seen in God's people (Abraham's descendants) living in God's place (the land of Canaan) under God's rule enjoying His blessings, but as we read on we will see that God's Kingdom would not finally be restored through the nation of Israel – they were simply preparing the way for Jesus Christ to come. The nation of Israel was chosen by God for three great purposes:

1. **To show other nations God's power and goodness** – so that other nations would recognise Him as the true God. In Exodus 19:6 the nation of Israel is described by God as a "*kingdom of priests*", meaning that they would make God known to the other nations and would bring the other nations to know God.
2. **To receive God's words (His Law and prophecies)** – so that they would be written down and passed on through the generations. In the New Testament (Romans 9:4) we read that: "*They are the people of Israel, chosen to be God's special children. God revealed his glory to them. He made covenants with them and gave his law to them. They have the privilege of worshipping him and receiving his wonderful promises.*"
3. **To one day produce a Saviour for all nations** – this was the ultimate way in which all nations would be blessed through Abraham's descendants. In Romans 9:5, we read that: "*from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ*" (NIV). This was God's ultimate plan to bring in His Kingdom through His special servant – the Messiah (or Christ).

God's special relationship with one nation, Israel, did not mean that He did not love the other peoples of earth. The Bible focuses on one nation because it was through them that God was working out His plan to save people from **all** nations and to bring His Kingdom to fulfilment. The Old Testament includes several stories of how God worked in the lives of people from other nations that show us that He loves all people. **Not all Abraham's descendants would have their sins forgiven – only those who walked, as he did, in the way of faith in God rather than the way of disobedience.**

## God's grace is received through faith on the basis of sacrifice

God did not accept Abraham because of good things that he did (Abraham was sinful just as all human beings are), but because he had faith in God. He listened to God's voice and obeyed, and he trusted God to lead his life. This faith was shown through Abraham's actions: firstly in leaving Haran to go to Canaan and ultimately in offering Isaac. The New Testament describes Abraham as a great person of faith (e.g. Romans chapter 4), and we can define faith based on his life:

**Faith is listening to God's words, trusting that they are true, and acting in obedience to them**

The Bible teaches that God's grace (His favour which is undeserved by us) is shown to all human beings despite our rebellion against Him. His grace means that He wants to forgive us for our sin and to give us the gift of a new relationship with Him and eternal life. However, His grace can only work in our lives when we have faith in Him. To receive a gift from another person you must first let go of the other things you are holding and then take the gift with empty hands. To receive the gift of God's forgiveness and His new life we must first stop holding on to the other things we trust in (for example, our own ability or pride) and admit that God is the King and that we need His help. Then we must trust that He is able to save us. In faith we depend on God to save us. This salvation is only possible on the basis of sacrifice, because sin must be punished through death. The Old Testament system of sacrifice expressed the people's faith in God to save them, but it also pointed forward to the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ who would die for our sin.

### Key Lesson: God chose Abraham to be the founder of His special nation, Israel

God accepted Abraham because of his faith. The nation of Israel was chosen to witness about God to the other nations, to receive God's word and to bring a Saviour for all nations into the world.