

Abraham's Faith and Why God Chose Him to Make His Covenant

The faith of Abraham has long been lauded as an example for Christian's to follow. Because of this, it is easily understood why God made His covenant with him. However, are there any other reasons that God revealed?

To begin this study, it is worthwhile to review the faith of Abraham.

In encouraging people to live by faith, the author of Hebrews provides well known examples from the Old Testament (Heb 11:8-10). In this citation, the author specifically refers to the earliest record of God speaking to Abraham.

Now the Lord said to Abram,
"Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father's house,
To the land which I will show you;
And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;
And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will curse.
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. (Gen 12:1-4)

Despite his pagan background (Josh 24:2), Abraham heard God's voice and obeyed leaving his extended family without any chance of an inheritance and the only country he's ever known to go somewhere new and unfamiliar.

The apostle Paul uses Abraham as an example to explain justification is by faith in God and not by ritual adherence to the Mosaic Law (Rom 4:1-22). In this instance Paul refers to God's promise to Abram of an heir (Gen 15:4-6) for no reason other than listening and obeying His word (Gen 12:1-2).

Then behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Gen 15:4-6)

Despite being married to a barren wife (Gen 11:30), Abraham fully believes and trusts God to fulfill His promises, and after this discourse, God makes His unilateral and unconditional Abrahamic Covenant.

From the biblical evidence, God does not present Himself as a physical being as He did with Adam (Gen 3:8), nor as a supernatural force as He did with the nation of Israel (Ex 13:21-22). The pagan Abraham seemed to have heard the voice of God, determined that it was real, subjectively placed a trust in it and obeyed to go to some unknown location.

The uniqueness of Abraham's faith can be best appreciated when the Hebrew terms for faith is seen in their Old Testament context.

Two families of Hebrew terms provide the meaning of faith.

'āman – This root word in its various forms provides the range of meaning from "reliability, stability, to be true" and "firmness, truth" to "certainty, to be assured" and "to be entrusted with, dependability."

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bāṭaḥ - This root in its various forms places an emphasis on the subjective aspect of faith: "to trust, rely upon" or "to put confidence in." There is the sense of well-being and security which results from believing in something so strongly that a confidence is generated from that trust.

Both terms imply an objective basis, such as a real fact(s), that is deserving of this Hebrew faith. Thus faith is 1) a belief in something real and true and 2) a trusting confidence in that truth.

When seen in the Old Testament, faith in God is often in the context of His work of deliverance through the Exodus.

After roughly 200 years of silence (see the article "430 Years in Egypt?" at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/5Bible/TransError430Years.aspx), God reveals Himself to Moses who asks His name. God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:14), which can be understood as "I AM WHO EXISTS." God makes known that He is alive and a historical fact.

The miracles of the Exodus validate the historical reality of God and become the objective basis for faith for the nation of Israel. For God, faith was 1) the belief that He is real and true and 2) a trusting confidence in Him demonstrated by obeying His voice and keeping His covenant. This determined whether the nation of Israel would be His own possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel." (Ex 19:3-6)

As a reminder to the nation of Israel of the reality of God's existence, the Ten Commandments would open with "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex 20:2), and the Ten Commandments would be recited often. The prophets of the Old Testament up until Daniel would recite this phrase or variants of it as a reminder of the historical reality of God (Josh 24:17; Judg 6:8; 1 Sam 12:8; 1 Ki 9:9; 2 Ki 17:36; Jer 2:6; 16:14; Dan 9:15).

When seen in the New Testament, faith in God is usually in the context of His work of deliverance through Jesus Christ.

After 400 years of silence, God reveals Himself through His Son Jesus Christ who reveals, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent" (John 6:29).

Although Jesus sought to demonstrate His deity through miracles throughout His earthly ministry, it was His death and resurrection that demonstrated the reality of Him being the Son of God as well as established the real existence of God the Father. This historical event became the basis of the gospel.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart"—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. (Rom 10:8-10)

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By establishing the historical fact that Jesus is indeed the Messiah Son of God, then one can place a confident trust in His promises. Biblical faith finds its basis in the past but with a view towards the future fulfillment of God's covenant promises.

While the above examples from the Old and New Testaments indicate that biblical faith was grounded in past historical events that demonstrated the reality of God, the faith of Abraham was not. Abraham did not witness any miracles nor needed any proof to believe that God was real so that he could trust His promises!

Because of Abraham's faith, God explicitly shares another reason why he was chosen for the unilateral unconditional covenant.

"For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him." (Gen 18:19)

Abraham was chosen, because God knew he could teach "his children and his household to keep the way of the Lord." But how did Abraham know how to do this?

The answer lies in God's discussion about redemption to the nation of Israel.

For the sons of Israel are My servants; they are My servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God. (Lev 25:55)

Abraham's faith did not simply believe that God was real and subjectively trusted His words. Abraham saw God as his Lord, King and Ruler of his life and the implication of himself as a servant. In recognition of God's sovereignty, obedience to God's word was demanded. And because Abraham "listened and obeyed," he learned how to be holy and walk blameless before God (Gen 17:1).

And Abraham's obedience would be tested to the extreme with the offering of his only son Isaac (Gen 22:1-18).

What can be learned from this?

1. Understand that Abraham's faith recognized that 1) God was real, sovereign and Lord of his life and that he was a servant, and 2) God's word was trustworthy and demanded obedience.

Today is no different. Through Jesus Christ, Believers know God the Father (John 14:6-10). Faith is recognizing 1) Jesus Christ is real, Sovereign Savior and Lord of the Believer's life (Col 1:13-18) and 2) God's word is trustworthy and must be obeyed (Luke 8:19-21).

Many Christians today see themselves as a friend of God, however, it is God who calls Abraham a friend (Isa 41:8; 2 Chron 20:7). Similarly it was Jesus who called the disciples His friends (John 15:15), and the apostles never shared the same sentiment nor claimed His friendship posthumously. The apostle Paul makes the point of indicating that Believers are servants of God (Rom 6:15-22).

2. Personal Bible study is the best way to learn "the way of the Lord" and this method takes precedence over anyone's presentation of God's word. Because the Holy Spirit wrote most of the Bible, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit provides each Believer with a personal guide into learning the "ways of the Lord" (1 Cor 2:10-16; Eph 3:3-6).

3. You cannot teach what you do not know.