



***Becoming Fully Devoted Followers  
by Studying the Followers Before Us***

**WEEK 4  
ABRAHAM**

**JANUARY 22-27, 2007**

<b>DAY</b>	<b>DIRECTED READING</b>	<b>DEVOTIONAL READING</b>	<b><i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i> READING</b>
<b>Monday</b>	Genesis 21:1-7	Psalm 16	Genesis 18-19
<b>Tuesday</b>	Genesis 22:1-19	Psalm 17	Genesis 20-23
<b>Wednesday</b>	Genesis 16 Genesis 21:8-20	Psalm 18	Genesis 24-25
<b>Thursday</b>	Genesis 25:19-34	Psalm 19	Genesis 26-27
<b>Friday</b>	Genesis 27-28	Psalm 20	Genesis 28-29



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**READ**

Genesis 21:1-7

Psalm 16

**REFLECT**

Abraham appears in the OT as the most important human figure in Genesis. The OT writers and later Jewish writings see him as the founder of the Israelite nation. In fact, three religions look back to Abraham in important ways: Judaism, which sees itself as the legitimate successor to Abraham through Isaac and Jacob; Islam, which sees itself as descended with better legitimacy through Ishmael, the older of Abraham's sons; and Christianity, which sees Abraham's faith as foundational for our understanding of faith in Christ.

Abraham lived some 2000 years before Christ. His father's family was from Ur in ancient Babylonia, and his father moved the family to the city of Haran, following the "Fertile Crescent" north and east. Abraham would move his own family, and his nephew Lot, further along the "Crescent," south to Judea. Abraham's life would be different from that of his fathers, who were urban dwellers. Abraham moved in the life of a nomad, following the seasons, and owning no property at all, with the exception of the burial site he purchased for family use when his wife Sarah died.

The reason for this change of life style was simple, and yet astonishing: he was a man who had heard and accepted the promise of God. The story is told simply and briefly: God spoke to Abraham telling of far-reaching plans, and Abraham believed and responded – at age 75 (Gen 12:1-4). From then on, his life was defined on the one hand by the instability that nomadic life entails; he was prey to nature's fluctuations, to the greater strength of established cities, and to concerns for the preservation of his line. But on the other hand his life is the story of

someone who was finding an astonishing stability in a developing relation with the almighty Creator of heaven and earth. As the NT Book of Hebrews puts it:

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow-heirs to the same promise. For he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect is God. (Heb 11:8-10)

I remember a scrap of information from a lecture years ago, that in Ur was found a clay shard that had the piece of a story on it. A father is saying to his son, "What have you been doing?" And the reply: "Nothing!" Where have I heard that before? This surprisingly contemporary glimpse of life in Ur has always helped me see what Abraham did: he looked beyond the sphere of "normal" human life, to discover what life could be if God were a conversation partner on a regular basis. Now, as we'll see in the next days, he brought lots of humanity along with him, his own and other people's as well. But his life made a difference because of this one thing: he accepted the added value that God was offering. He decided to live as a friend of God.

## **RESPOND**

We each can think of a certain number of friends that were basic to our acceptance of the Christian faith. Surely our love and respect for them lies in this, that they showed us the meaning of instinctive faith. When was the last time you shared your appreciation of them? A card or letter wouldn't have to wait until Valentine's Day.

## **PRAY**

*Thou will make known to me the path of life; in Thy presence is fullness of joy; in Thy right hand there are treasures forever.* Psalm 16:11

D.D.

## READ

Genesis 22:1-19

Psalms 17

## REFLECT

To Abraham, God unfolded the covenant. In his religious “value” for Jews, Muslims, and Christians, Abraham is first and foremost the receiver of the covenant. The covenant is more than just a friendly relationship with God; other earlier figures had this already, such as Enoch (Gen. 5:21-24) and Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18). These friendships were no doubt of great value to Enoch and Melchizedek, but they were not really replicated or passed on to anyone else. They were individual friendships.

With Abraham, God wanted something much more ambitious. He wanted to begin not just a friendship, but a global history. He wanted a partnership with Abraham that would extend to world wide dimensions: “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen 12:3) To do this, God had to make provision not only for individual relationships with Himself, but also for responsible relationships among a growing community of believers. “Friends of God” would also need to know how to be friends with each other. Mutual responsibility, with God and with each other, would be the heart of the idea of covenant.

But to accomplish this partnership goal, God first needed a partner. The quality we’re looking for here is the almost technical OT word “righteousness.” We tend to think of it as personal “uprightness,” but it’s really more of a relational term. At its most specific, this means the kind of capacity to be there for others as they expect it. It’s probably the particular quality that we have in mind as we are looking for someone to join a committee or a team: will they hold up their end? Whatever may be the case with human teams, a team with God on it simply requires

that others have the same purity and selflessness that He does, if things are to progress. And we know from the story of Adam that human beings, for all their strengths, will not bring those qualities to the table. God's plan required a human team. How could that ever happen?

The key to this problem in the story of Abraham is found in Genesis 15:1-6. God reveals a bit more of his plan to Abraham, who balks. He asks how these things can possibly be. As God reiterates His determination to succeed, Abraham believes in the God who is taking all this time and care. In 15:6 we read, "Then he believed in the Lord. And He reckoned it to him as righteousness." As Abraham simply took God at his word, God could affirm that attitude as righteousness, that is, as the beginning of a partnership. As long as Abraham simply accepted God's word, and followed in appropriate obedience, the partnership could progress.

The Christian NT connects powerfully with this verse and this moment of faith. Romans 4 (especially at v.13) expounds the insight that in Christ this promise of covenant partnership can be extended to all nations and all peoples. God takes us on, not on the basis of our obedience, but of our willingness to believe and obey. Our willingness to hear His word is what He is after. In this way we are "justified," that is, accepted as righteous partners, on the basis of faith alone. In this we follow in the steps of the nomad Abraham, and enjoy the promise given to him.

## **RESPOND**

We live our lives in a complex web of responsibilities, based on implied or articulated partnerships. These can be sustaining, or draining. As we accept our relationship with God more and more as the partnership that undergirds these other partnerships, our life of faith can help us be more available and effective in our other obligations.

## **PRAY**

*Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings. . . . As for me, I will behold your face in righteousness; I will be satisfied with your likeness when I awake.* Psalm 17: 8, 15

D.D.

**READ**

Genesis 16, and 21:8-20

Psalm 18

**REFLECT**

As we noted yesterday, Abraham is the great example of the faith that accepts the offer of relationship with God, as God graciously establishes a covenant partnership. Today we note that Abraham is also a great example of faith in action, as the covenant begins to work its way forward.

We see it in the prompt way that Abraham leaves Haran as soon as the Lord commands him to (Gen 12:4). We see it in how confidently he “walks about the land” (13:17) even though it is not at all obvious that it is really his.

We see it especially in the way that Abraham sets up sanctuaries of worship to God here and there, testifying to what God has done for him, and inviting others to worship Him. He establishes a sanctuary in Shechem upon his arrival in the promised land (12:6-7), another near Bethel (12:8), and another to the south at Hebron (13:18). As his life is now the Lord’s, so also his testimony is of the majesty of this Lord. It is so easy for us to take Sunday worship for granted, not remembering that it is the result of determination, expended resources, planning, and energy. And behind all that, somebody has taken very seriously the fact that the Lord is “worthy to be praised” (Psalm 18:3). Abraham knew that very well, and took practical steps to see that it happened.

The most powerful story, even uncomfortably so, of Abraham’s instinctive obedience to the Lord, is the story of his willingness to sacrifice Isaac his young son (22:1-19). God’s command that Abraham kill the child of the promise is described as a test (22:1): Abraham takes Isaac to a desolate peak, ready to offer him by killing him and burning

him. Much of the poignancy is in the details: Isaac carries the wood of the fire, and asks plaintively where the ram is that is to be sacrificed. Abraham's brave words, that "God will provide the sacrifice," don't stop him from actually readying Isaac for death. And then God speaks, accepting Abraham's will for the deed, and providing a ram. The happy ending relieves some of the tension. Christians can hear the echoes of Jesus' death for us on the cross: He carried the wood of His own sacrifice, and He Himself was the lamb of God's provision for us. We can rejoice somewhat, too, that from our vantage point further along in the history of the covenant community we can feel we will never be called to such acts. But Abraham's amazing act of faith can still challenge us today to take seriously the occasional call of God that we clarify the extent of our dedication to him. We don't pick up the butcher knife and follow Abraham, but we are called to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Paul, as we said yesterday, liked to focus on the foundational "righteousness" of Abraham's faith. James, brother of Jesus, like to focus on the practical activity of Abraham's faith (James 2:21). Abraham's readiness to follow where his God led him, in a level-headed determination that marked each day, surely commends him to us as a friend, as he was also the friend of God.

## **RESPOND**

In our busy lives there are many times we are engaged with people who do not yet know the joys of worshipping the one true God. As we can determine to approach such moments in faith, as those who are ready to touch others with the friendship God brings, we will find faith active in love.

## **PRAY**

*For by Thee I can run through a troop, and by my God I can leap over a wall . . . . The Lord liveth, and blessed be my rock, and may the God of my salvation be exalted. Psalm 18:29, 46*

D.D.

## READ

Genesis 25:19-34

Psalm 19

## REFLECT

We have looked at the deep faith of Abraham, the friend of God, and the one who has engendered and influenced ancient lines of religious thought and practice. Today we will observe how human Abraham nevertheless remained, and how blunt the Bible is about the faults of this great man.

First, in a sort of descending series of traits, Abraham was a man of human loyalties and concerns. Part of this came from his powerful sense of family. He insisted that Isaac's wife come from his own people back in Haran. And certainly God used precisely the family tribe to further His global plans, until the moment that He was ready to transcend it through Jesus, the savior of the world. Abraham expressed his family instincts as he involved himself in local wars only to the extent that he was able to save his nephew Lot from captivity (Gen 14:1-16). He carefully made provision for a family burial site when his wife died (23:1-20). And his concern for the birth of the son of promise looms large throughout his story: simply a family man.

Second, though, Abraham was a man capable of dangerous human folly. We see it in the foolishness, committed twice, of trying to pass off Sarah as his sister to a neighboring king (12:1-20; 20:1-18). Apparently there was an established practice of offering family members to join the households of other lords, in order to solidify relationships. Abraham the nomad clearly worried about his security in the proximity of greater kings. This foible not only displays his lack of trust in the Lord's ability to protect and provide, it also endangered the Lord's global project of salvation, since it set up the potential that Sarah would bear children to a man other than Abraham. Scripture gives us a full account of Abraham's lie, and God's painstaking retrieval of the situation.

Worse, Abraham doubted God's ability even to fulfill the central promise: a son born in Abraham and Sarah's old age. He and Sarah decided to manipulate the promise into fulfillment relying on a legal technicality of the day, that a child born to any woman in a household belongs to the head of the household. And so they plotted for Abraham to have a child by Hagar, Sarah's servant. The fallout of this disaster is clear in the story: the deterioration of relationship between the two women, the inability of Hagar to find a satisfactory position in the home, and, again, the threat to God's long-term plan. Interestingly, the tribal names attributed to the descendants of Hagar – and to those of Keturah, a second household servant – justify the assumption held by both Jews and Arabs that the Jews are descended from Abraham through Isaac, while the Arabs are descended from Abraham through Ishmael, Hagar's son. Fallout indeed!

Finally, though, we return to the very human qualities of Abraham's faith. His faith was not the sort that separated him from the realities of his life. Rather, he followed God with the same passion that he gave to all his pursuits. This is the point: He shows us that faith in God is never an abandonment of ourselves and our lives, but a fulfillment of them, as God takes the broken pieces and retrieves the situation. This is not an excuse for ongoing sin; but it is a promise that God can take any one of us where he finds us, and bring us along from there.

## **RESPOND**

It is easy for us to rejoice in the blessings of Christ, and harder to determine where the challenges are coming. It is the blessings that strengthen us for the challenges. Sometimes the biggest challenge is to receive God's blessing and love; sometimes it is in putting it into action in the home, at work, or in the neighborhood.

## **PRAY**

*Who can discern his errors? Acquaint me of my hidden faults . . . . Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Psalm 19:12, 14*

D.D.

## **READ**

Genesis 27 and 28

Psalms 20

## **REFLECT**

Today we will look at the impact of Abraham in the New Testament, in the context of Christian faith. The most important aspect is undoubtedly Paul's insight that the kind of faith Abraham displayed is also basic to Christian faith as well.

Paul lays out his teaching on this in a couple of places. We will look at what he says in Galatians 3. The background here is Paul's frustration with Christians who have decided that even though they are non-Jews, it would be better for them to pick up Jewish habits, and especially the keeping of the Jewish Law, as a Christian way of living. Paul's answer to them is that the Law was always a secondary element in Jewish faith. Before the Law came simple belief in God's promises. Specifically, before Moses brought the law, there was already Abraham, for whom simple faith was enough. So faith, and not observance of the Law, was basic for Israel.

Further, Paul explains that the promise given to Abraham, that is, to "Abraham's seed," is of the sort that is only fulfilled in Christ. Paul even points out that "seed" is singular and not plural in the text – so Christ himself is the intended fulfillment! In the interim time before Christ came, God gave Israel the Law as a temporary measure, "as a tutor," whose principles would help Israel accept the Christ when He appeared. It infuriates Paul that the Law, which gives way to Christ, should be picked up again by those who have come to know Christ. Abraham, he says, is our true father. "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ.... And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise." (Gal 3:26, 27, 29)

This is a drastic reading of biblical history, since it claims that Christ is the one true heir of Abraham, and only those who believe in Christ are proper children of Abraham. Still, not many Christians would be willing to disagree with Paul on this matter. The story of Abraham is certainly about the free opportunity of a life-changing belief in God. We have nothing to bring to this God of holiness, no Law we can satisfy, in order to convince Him of our worthiness for His attentions. Rather, He did what He didn't have to do: He initiated relationship and caused it to strengthen and grow. He initiated relationship with Abraham one day in Haran, and He has been at it ever since: with young Prince Moses of Egypt, with the unborn Jeremiah, with fishermen on the Sea of Galilee who thought life was all about fishing; and He initiated relationship with you, and He did so with me. Abraham "believed God, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3, Gal 3:6).

On the other hand, the New Testament is also clear that the faith we are talking about is one that is active in obedience, and again Abraham is a major exemplar. Hebrews 11: 8-19 draws on Abraham as a figure of faith, in what he was willing to do for the things he believed. James 2:21-23 sees Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac as the other side of the coin of faith: faith in God is so compelling that it will express itself in real life situations time after time.

## **RESPOND**

God has provided the foundation of faith, by providing his Son as a sacrifice for us on the cross. He has also given himself to us as we walk the walk of faith, as a day-to-day companion. Are we living each day fully as a response to God's initiative of relationship? Where today do we see the gift of his love, and the chance to share his love with others?

## **PRAY**

*Now I know the Lord saves his anointed; He will answer from His holy heaven, with the saving strength of His right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we will remember the name of the Lord our God. Psalm 20:6,7*

Dave Dorman