

A HERITAGE OF FAITH

Many of us have charted our family tree. Most of us have done this by starting with ourselves and branching backwards. However, in order to study the family which ultimately would become the Jewish nation, we will start at the beginning.

Read Genesis 11:10, 26-31. From what you learn in these verses, begin a family tree chart below which describes the beginning of this faith family.

God's plan was to establish a covenant relationship with a man named Abraham (originally known as Abram). From this passage, we find that he was descended from Noah's son Shem (v. 10 – see Family Tree Chart on pg. 22). It is from Shem that we get the designation "Semitic." All Jews trace their ancestry to Abraham:

*"Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, Who seek the LORD:
Look to the rock from which you were hewn And to the quarry from
which you were dug. "Look to Abraham your father And to Sarah
who gave birth to you in pain; When he was but one I called him,
Then I blessed him and multiplied him." (Isaiah 51:1-2)*

Abraham did not come out of a world of uneducated shepherds. He came from the great city of Ur of the Chaldees. There would have been things like centers of culture, hubs of commerce and banks within this city. Those living here would have been educated in science, art and philosophy.¹ Ur would have been considered the modern urban society of ancient civilization. It was out of this culture that God came to Abraham!

Read Genesis 12:1-5. This is the first recorded interaction between Abraham and God. What did God promise Abraham? What was Abraham's response?

DIG DEEPER

The New Testament also uses the biblical phrase "our father Abraham."

Read the following scriptures and note why Abraham is part of our Christian "roots."

Acts 7:2

Galatians 3:9

John 8:31-41

Romans 4:9-12

THINK ABOUT THIS

God came to Abraham in the midst of contemporary urban culture. He can be found wherever people are seeking Him.

How is God coming to you in the midst of the hub bub of your life?

Abraham came out of a society that was polytheistic (believing in more than one god). Yet, he came to believe in the one, true God, *Yahweh*. God Himself promised Abraham several things:

- A land that God would show him
- A great nation which would come forth from him
- A blessing
- A name
- Protection by the hand of God

We know nothing about Abraham's struggle to believe, we only know that through faith, Abraham obeyed God and simply went forth, not knowing exactly where he was going. Traveling several hundred miles to the West, he arrived in Canaan, a land he knew nothing about. Notice that Abraham took with him his wife, his nephew and all his possessions, indicating no intention to return to Ur. This indicates a great faith in a God with whom he was just getting acquainted. But like all of us, his faith wavered.

Read Genesis 12:10-20. Why did Abraham's faith waiver? What action did he take? What were the consequences of his actions?

DID YOU KNOW:

This is not the only time that Abraham used this tactic.

Read Genesis 20.

What prompted Abraham to repeat this mistake?

Even though he failed a second time in the same way, God blessed him. What encouragement does this give you?

Scripture tells us that there was a famine in the land. Instead of staying put and trusting in God, Abraham took matters into his own hands and moved his entourage to Egypt. Here fear instead of faith controlled him. This fear prompted him to devise a deception with Sarah, his wife. Passing her off as his sister (she was actually his half-sister), he allowed Pharaoh to take her into his household. As a result, Abraham was treated well in Egypt. But the Lord was not about to bless Abraham's personal plan. Pharaoh's household was struck with great plagues and he realized that he had been duped by Abraham.

Commanding his men to escort Abraham and his family out of Egypt, Abraham eventually came to the Negev at Bethel which scripture reveals was where Abraham originally set up camp. God's plan would not be thwarted. He took this man of faith back to the beginning, giving him a second chance to start over.

We often think that when we start over, we are assured of smooth sailing. But this was not the case. There was conflict between his herdsmen and the herdsmen of his nephew, Lot. As a result, they separated. But that was not

the end of the story. He ended up having to fight a war in order to rescue Lot and his family. Even in this God blessed Abraham.

Read Genesis 15:1-6. In this passage, God renews His promise to Abraham. However, Abraham once again tries to fulfill God's promise his own way. What is Abraham's solution to the problem? What is God's solution?

It was common for a childless man to adopt a servant in order to inherit. This servant would then be required to serve the childless couple as long as they lived. According to custom, if a natural son was born, then the adopted son would have to yield the right of the inheritance. However, adopting a son was not God's plan. So He reinforced His promise to Abraham that a son from his own body would inherit the covenant. But, God's promise was not quickly fulfilled and once again Abraham's faith began to waiver.

Read Genesis 16:1-6. Once again Abraham and Sarah tried to fulfill God's promise their own way. What was their solution? What was the result of their plan?

God's promise stalled and hope seemed to be lost, so Sarah gave her handmaiden, Hagar to Abraham so she could conceive and produce a son for Sarah. This was a common practice in this area of the ancient world because a wife was obliged to provide her husband with an heir. The stipulation was that if an offspring was born through this union, then expulsion of this slave and her child was forbidden. Once again, if a natural son was born by the legal wife, then it was her child who would inherit.²

After Hagar conceived, the relationship between her and her mistress, Sarah, disintegrated. Hagar ran away, but was commanded by God to return and submit to her mistress and she ultimately bore a son named Ishmael (cf. Genesis 16:7-15).

Read Genesis 21:2-9. How and when was God's promise eventually fulfilled?

DID YOU KNOW:
The word "negev" in Hebrew means "dry." It is also used to describe anything that is south. Geographically, it refers to the area around Beersheba.

DID YOU KNOW?
Archeologists have uncovered tablets from the ancient city of Nuzi which was in Mesopotamia. These tablets have provided a wealth of material concerning customs and culture in the period of the Patriarchs. These tablets have confirmed that the facts of Genesis are deeply rooted in ancient customs.²⁵

Isaac was born in his parent's old age. This was a sign to them that God fulfills His promises when things seem impossible. What He says He will do, He will do! Sometimes the probability of fulfillment must die in us in order for God to fulfill His Word, His way!

However, Hagar's son became a thorn in the flesh and a source of conflict within the family. Because of this, Sarah requested that Abraham send both Hagar and Ishmael away. Understanding the common prohibitions against this action explains why Abraham was so hesitant to agree to this. Yet he left the final decision in Sarah's hands because of God's prompting to do so. Even this took faith on the part of Abraham.

Practices of deceit have been introduced into the family line by Abraham and Sarah that later would be repeated in future generations. It is encouraging to note that it was not their deceit, but their faith which will endure for all eternity. Our failures, even though repeated, cannot outweigh our faith in God. God has a remedy for our sin, but it is impossible for us to please Him without walking in faith (cf. Hebrews 11:6). Abraham and Sarah's faith was also passed along to a new generation and would continue to live in those who picked up the mantle of trusting in God.

SELAH!

**Abraham believed God in the midst of a people who did not know Him!
How does his example inspire you to do the same?**

Once he made a decision to respond to God, Abraham left no provisions to return to his old life. How is he an example of what we are to do as we personally respond to God's call?

Even though he stepped out in faith, Abraham struggled with consistently walking in faith. But he did not let his failures define him. He is called the Father of Faith! What failures are you allowing yourself to be defined by? How can Abraham's life foster increased faith in God's future for you?

After he failed, God took Abraham back to the beginning to start over. When faith comes hard, the best thing to do is go back to the beginning. Is there someplace God is calling you to return to?

We often believe that when we are walking in faith that things should go smoothly. Abraham's life is an example of how hard it is to continue in the path the Lord has for us. What struggles are you facing that God is using to catapult you to a greater walk of faith?

Many times God's promises seem to die before He can fulfill them. What situation seems impossible to you? What promise has God given you concerning it? Keep holding on, your breakthrough is coming!

Every parent teaches their children through their own life—both good and bad qualities. How does this realization give you a renewed sense of responsibility to live righteously before your children/grandchildren? As we strive to live for God, we have a promise that the good will remain.

ENDNOTES

¹ Adin Steinsaltz *Biblical Images* (United States: BasicBooks a division of HarperCollins Publishers, 1984) 17

² John Bright *A History of Israel: Third Edition* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1981) 79