

By Faith

Genesis 12:1-5; Hebrews 11:8-10; Romans 4:3

**First Presbyterian Church
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Shortly after September, 2011 (9/11) and the attacks and destruction of the Twin Towers, something quite unique happened that you may not remember. Newsweek magazine featured three religions in its cover story: Judaism, Islam and Christianity. And Newsweek did a pretty good job of identifying the similarities between these religions.

- They all confess the existence of one supreme being, that is, they are monotheistic.
- They teach that this God created the world in six days
- They teach that the first man was Adam and that Eve was his wife
- They teach that men have sinned against God and need His mercy and forgiveness
- They teach that this God has sent a series of prophets into the world
- They teach that there will be a day of judgment.....and
- They all teach that the Old Testament is God's revelation, although they interpret it differently

Ultimately, the one thing that truly separates these religions is the identity and character of Jesus Christ. That should surprise no one. Jesus' question to His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?", is the most important question anyone will ever answer. It is the most important question you will ever answer.

There is one person, however, about whom there is general agreement and this Newsweek article featured this man. Each of these religions considers this man to be a true prophet, a man of true faith and obedience, a father with descendants beyond counting and a man that the Bible says was a "friend of God". Each of these religions acknowledges him as a central and unique figure in the matter of God's revelation of His truth to the human race.

Before we go to Scripture to read about him, let's set the stage. About 400 years after the Great Flood, there was a seaport near the Persian Gulf in Mesopotamia on the banks of the Euphrates River. It was a most magnificent city. It was a center for manufacturing, farming, and shipping. It was a metropolis of fabulous fertility and wealth. Caravans could be seen going in every direction to distant lands and ships sailing from the docks with cargoes of copper and building stone.

The city had two main temples and, while the citizens of this seaport worshipped many gods, these two temples were dedicated to Nannar, the moon god, and his wife, Ningal. This city and the surrounding cultures were pagan and many practiced child sacrifice to appease Nannar and Ningal.

A baby was born into this rich pagan culture. Doubtless as a young man he, too, had been introduced to these twin idols by his father. Little is known about his growing up years and we only begin to learn more about him when he was almost 75 years old. His father, Terah, had built a fortune in this flourishing economy. No doubt this man and his brothers stood to inherit a great fortune.

The name of the city was UR. The name of this man was Abram. (his name would later be changed by God to Abraham) He had a wife named Sarai (whose name would later be changed by God to Sarah). And Scripture says that Sarah was barren, "she had no child." At 75 years of age, Abraham had a life transforming spiritual experience that led to his becoming the patriarch of Judaism and Islam and that led to his becoming known as a 'man of faith' in the Christian faith.

The importance of Abraham's life in our understanding of our faith cannot be overestimated. He is mentioned 307 times in the Bible.

- 234 times in the OT
- 73 times in the NT

And no less than 27 books of the Bible refer to him.

We will begin reading at Genesis Chapter 12:

Genesis 12:1 Now the LORD said^[a] to Abram, "Go from your country^[b] and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him

who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”^[4]

⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan....”

The New Testament passages this morning are from the Book of **Hebrews** and the Book of Romans.

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.” Hebrews 11:8-10

“For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’” Romans 4:3

Almost twenty years ago when I was an elder here at First Pres and managing a wireless company here in South Louisiana, I was the chair of our church’s search committee that was seeking a new Sr. Pastor. Russ Stevenson had served us all so well for twenty years and was retiring. Our committee began what we thought would be a long arduous process. We met for 3-4 months before we looked at the first resume. We were defining the gifts, talents and character of the person that God might call to First Presbyterian Church. We spent about half our time praying for that person. We prayed for our wisdom and discernment. We prayed for God’s leading in our deliberations and for His leading in the life of the one He had already chosen to be our Senior Pastor.

When we began to review recommendations and resumes, one person who came highly recommended seemed to be the obvious place to begin and it was my responsibility as chair to contact him. He was a Vanderbilt graduate. He received his Masters of Divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary and earned his Doctor of Ministry from Reformed Theological Seminary. His resume and recommendations were superlative.

I first contacted Gerrit Dawson through a phone call. I hoped to begin a dialogue with him about our church, our commitment to Christ and our vision for the future. He seemed reluctant to talk. In fact, he wrote me a letter following our conversation telling me how much he loved his church in North Carolina. He told me that he and Rhonda had made many good, good friends over the years, that they had built a cottage on the side of a North Carolina mountain as a family retreat. And the cottage was virtually next door to Rhonda's parent's mountain home. As you can imagine, Gerrit described it as being nestled in among the trees with a view of the distant hillsides and mountains, warmed by a fireplace in the winter and cooled by mountain breezes in the summer. He closed by saying that he did not want to be dishonest and lead me on but he was open to talk if it was God's call to do so.

Of course, after Gerrit's description of their life in Lenoir, it was apparent, to me at least, that this was going to be a challenge. As I recall, I picked up the phone after reading his letter, told him how much I appreciated his honesty and candor and then I said, **“And God called Abraham and Abraham obeyed and went even though he did not know where he was going.”**

Gerrit replied, **“You have my attention.”** We will celebrate 20 years with Gerrit and Rhonda as our Senior Pastor Couple next May.

Well, God called Gerrit and God called Abraham. He called Gerrit to leave his home, his work and his life in Lenoir and go to a place he'd not been before. He called Abraham to leave the land he grew up in, to leave his family, to leave behind the family fortune. God told him to go to a place he'd not been before. And God revealed to Abraham His blessing and promises: 1) I will make you a great nation 2) I will bless you and make your name great 3) In you all the families of the of the earth will be blessed 4) To your offspring I will give this land 5) Anyone who dishonors you I will curse!!! All of this got Abraham's attention and **“he obeyed and went”**.

There are at least three things that I'd like for us to learn or be reminded of from this account of Abraham's calling.

The First is that God is sovereign. He is sovereign over everything. It was God who called Abraham into relationship with Himself. And it is God who calls us. Abraham lived in a pagan land, in a pagan culture, surrounded by pagan people. No doubt growing up learning to worship their pagan gods. Scripture tells us that **“the Lord said to Abram, go.....”** Scripture does not tell us why God chose Abraham! Abraham is not described as some God fearing, faithful and righteous man before God reached out to him. In God’s sovereignty, He chose Abraham when he was 75 years old. He chose Abraham and changed his heart of stone into a heart of flesh. Abraham looked at the world around him and God gave him a hunger for something more. God enabled Abraham to hear His voice and to hear His promises. God drew Abraham to Himself, not because Abraham was deserving but because God was gracious and merciful. What an amazing revelation this must have been for Abraham having lived in the darkness of the Godless culture of Ur. Abraham has got to have asked “Why me?” Sad to say that ours is a pagan culture as well. The gods worshipped in our culture are just as dominant and demanding. Child sacrifice just as prevalent. And God continues to ‘call’ His people to be set apart, to be faithful and to obey. And it is God who enables His called ones to respond to His call.

Jesus said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”

John 6:44

God is sovereign. God chose Abraham.

The Second thing we can learn is that Abraham’s response to God’s call in faith was the same faith that we have come to have in Christ Jesus. But how can that be? Isn’t our faith in Jesus Christ? Jesus was not yet born in the time of Abraham, right? And Jesus said, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”** didn’t He? How can it be true that Abraham’s faith was the same as ours?

The answers to those questions are absolutely yes. Yes, our faith is in Jesus Christ. Yes, Jesus was not yet born in the time of Abraham. Yes, the only way to come into relationship with the Father is through His Son, Jesus Christ. But this is where we find that Scripture helps us to interpret Scripture. This is where we are able to search the whole of the Gospel to better understand the incredible and transcendent reality of God’s grace and mercy. This is where we can better understand His plan for our salvation.

Let's look at several passages of Scripture that will help us better understand that our saving faith in Christ is the same faith as Abraham's.

First, Scripture tells us that Jesus has been eternally existent. When Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees, he said this **“Your Father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day, he saw it and was glad” John 8:56.** They said to Him, **“You are not yet fifty years old and have you seen Abraham?”** Jesus said to them, **“Truly, Truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” John 8:56-58**

The Apostle John said in Chapter 1 regarding Jesus, the Living Word, **“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He (Jesus) was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made that was made.” John 1:1-3**

Finally, when Jesus spoke with His Father the night before He was crucified, He prayed, **“Father glorify me with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.” John 17:5**

The point of all of this is that Jesus has always been; eternally existent.

Not only has Jesus always been, **God's plan for salvation has always been as well.** Scripture says in **Ephesians 1:4** that **“He chose us in Him (Christ Jesus) before the foundation of the world.”**

Galatians 3:29: “And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.”

What promise?

“Scripture....announced the gospel in advance to Abraham.” Galatians 3:8

That is why Jesus said to the Pharisees, **“Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day. He saw it and was glad.” John 8:56**

In **1 Peter, 1:11** Scripture tells us that the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be ours **“searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.”** The very Spirit of Christ was leading them into the truth of the grace of the cross that was to come.

Listen to God's Word in **Galatians 3:6** **"...Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness**

The New Testament Scriptures emphasize the faith of Abraham because God's covenant promise to him is one and the same covenant God shares with believers today. **We cannot read the New Testament Scriptures and come to any other conclusion.**

I asked Jaime Carnaggio how she would describe this, that we share the same faith with Abraham and are spiritually his children, and she said, **"The cross goes both ways, forward and backward."** Jaime was right.

One commentator put it this way: **"Abraham was given the certain knowledge that a Savior was to be born out of the line of his generations and that this Savior would save him from his sin. In faith he looked for that Savior. His faith is really no different than ours, which looks back to that Savior for salvation. We look back, but Abraham looked forward in faith to the coming Messiah. For that reason he also was united to Jesus Christ by faith. He therefore, like us, was saved in the blood of that One to come by virtue of the promise given."**

By faith, Abraham was counted righteous. By faith, Abraham was saved. By faith in the Savior to come, Abraham is known as the 'man of faith'. And his salvation was by grace through faith and that was a gift of God.....and so is ours!

The third thing I hope we can learn from Abraham's story is this and I think Corrie Ten Boom says it best:

"Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God."

We saw that Abraham obeyed and went even though He did not know where he was going. He trusted God for His promises and then followed God in faith that God would be faithful to those promises.

I visited with a young man some years back and he said to me that if God had come to him and said the things He said to Abraham, he would do as God told him

as well. He said that he would obey and go. The incredible thing is that God **has** spoken, He has spoken to us all through His Word.

Listen to but a few of God's promises to those who trust and obey Him:

“And my God will meet all your need according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” **Philippians 4:19**

“...God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you’. So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’” **Hebrews 13:5-6**

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God, I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” **Isaiah 41:10**

“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.” **Psalms 32:8**

“For I know the plans I have for you”, declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” **Jeremiah 29:11**

“Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen!”

Ephesians 3:20

Remember Corrie Ten Boom's admonition, “**Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.**” With promises like these and so many others, we can look into the future with confidence.

Abraham believed God. He obeyed and went. He trusted God for the next 25 years! Abraham believed God to be faithful. He believed that God would make

him a father and give him a son. He believed that in spite of the fact that he and Sarah had no children, God would be faithful to His promise. And God was faithful. Abraham was 100 years old, and Sarah was 90. But God gave him his son, Isaac. And it was through Isaac that Abraham's offspring would inherit the land, be as the stars of the heavens and bless all the nations through the Messiah to come. For 25 years Abraham trusted that he would be a father. 25 years! And it was through the faith of this father that all the world has been blessed! Abraham lived to be 175 years old and had quite a few more children. But Isaac was the son of promise.

One last observation for you dads out there. If you read the rest of chapter 12 and then Genesis chapters 13-25 it may be shocking to see that Abraham sins so soon after obeying the Lord. The Bible never shies away from people's sin. It always makes it clear that our 'heroes' of faith, like Abraham, were deeply flawed and sinful people. If we read Scripture as a book of morality lessons or fables, they will be hard to understand until we realize that the only true hero of the Bible is our Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is then that we begin to see how vast God's grace is. We are no different than Abraham. Each of us has moments of failure and success in our walk with Christ. But God's grace prevails because He is faithful to forgive.