

Abraham

WHAT do we need to know about Abraham. There is much that could be said about him. The Bible shows him to be a key figure in the history of God's dealings with mankind. And he is a central person in the history of the Jews.

The writer of the book *Hebrews* wants us to focus on three facts. Abraham was (1) a man of faith; he (2) obeyed God; and (3) he knew what God will do. All three are stated in Hebrews 11 verses 8-10. We shall focus on points two and three. But we shall do so noting them to be key features of those who have faith.

Obey

Abraham grew up in a part of the world where pagan practices, such as moon worship, prevailed. He left Ur of the Chaldees and travelled, via Haran, to Palestine. Ur was a Sumerian city-state of ancient Mesopotamia. Today that area is part of Iraq.

Why did Abraham leave his homeland? Because God issued a command. He was told, rather than merely invited, to

travel hundreds of miles westward to "a place that he was to receive as an inheritance" (*verse 8*). The command, then, was joined to a promise. Abraham heard both. The information imparted to him by God was clear and unequivocal.

God, of whom he had been previously ignorant, revealed himself to Abraham. We are not told Abraham had a vision. We are informed God spoke to him. You can read further details of his call in Genesis 12.1ff. The facts given are instructive. They point to the main means of communication used by God. He speaks. He wants us to hear his word. He also wants us to be like Abraham and be those who heed his word.

These details stress the importance of listening. We know how vital that is in everyday life. Our loved ones would soon become upset if we never listened to anything they say. Tempting though it may be to ignore God - unbelievers naturally want to do and do just that - the example of Abraham reminds us our first concern should be to hear what God wants us to hear.

Does this mean that we should wait to hear a voice from heaven? No it does not. God has given to us his written word. It is the sixty-six books of the Bible. These form all that we need to hear and know. We do not need to seek mystical experiences. Nor do we need to empty our minds in the hope that we reach an experience of inner peace.

Over many years God progressively revealed himself to mankind. He used people like Abel, Enoch, Noah and

Abraham. Later he used Moses and David. And later still he used the prophets of ancient times, and then the apostles appointed by Jesus Christ. But supremely he used his Son. It is with that great fact the author of Hebrews begins his book (*Hebrews 1.1ff*).

Our responsibility is to listen to what God says in Christ and in the word he caused to be written (*2 Timothy 3.15-17*). He wants us to hear about how he dealt with Abraham. He wants us to discover his promises. And he wants us to put him first in our lives.

Abraham listened. How did he respond to God's call? Twice the writer of Hebrews uses the word 'went'. He tells us Abraham 'went out (*from Ur*), not knowing where he was going' (*verse 8*). And that 'he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land' (*verse 9*). And on both occasions he underlines that such obedience was a direct consequence of his faith. Both verses begin with the words 'by faith'.

Here, then, is a key feature of true faith. Here is a test we can apply to ourselves. Do we claim to be believers? Do we describe ourselves as followers of Jesus? If the answer we give us 'yes' then we must also go on to ask whether we are those who obey God.

Obedience is not an optional extra. Nor is it a means of earning favour with God. Getting into a right relationship with God is never by works. It is always by grace. It is a consequence of God's sovereign pleasure and will. He speaks. He calls. He promises. He commands. He invites us to respond. Those who hear and believe obey. But even our believing is a

gift of God (*Ephesians 2.8*). Yes, we have a responsibility to believe. And we also have the responsibility to obey. Obedience is a fruit of faith.

Knowing God's plan

We are told another interesting fact about Abraham. In verse 10 of Hebrews 11 we discover this man, who travelled hundreds of miles away from his homeland to a promised land, also looked forward. That is not a reference to the fact that he watched where he was going. He obviously did that. No, it refers to the fact that Abraham was aware of what is yet to be.

He saw that what God called him and his family to do - to travel from Ur to a land of promise - was a picture, a type or shadow of something even more important. He saw that this world is not our final resting place. He saw that this life is not all that there is. In particular he saw that God is going to bring into being a new heavens and a new earth.

There are important clues in the text. For example, in verse 9 we are told that his life in the land of promise was as in 'a foreign land'. We are also told that there he and his heirs (Isaac and Jacob) lived in tents.

Yes, Palestine was a foreign land in that it was not the place of birth or childhood. But nor was it their final destination. It was a staging post on the journey. Hence they were like foreigners within it. It is as though they said 'we do not belong here'.

This point becomes more clear when you note that they did not build houses. Ur

was a city-state. It was a place with buildings. But Abraham, Isaac and Jacob -that is three generations - lived in the land of promise in tents. They knew they were just passing through.

Although we may live in houses rather than tents, the attitude Abraham adopted is to be the attitude we have. This world is not everything. We will not be here forever. This is not the final state of things. That has yet to be revealed.

Abraham looked forward to inhabiting a city. But there is something special about that city. It is not designed by man. It is not built by men. And its foundations are not laid by any person. It is God's creation - from start to finish. He is its architect and constructor.

Why is this world not our final resting place? Because it is subject to decay. It is not eternal. As Paul says to the men and women of faith in Rome, "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (*Romans 8.21*). What Paul discovered is what Abraham discovered before him.

Abraham never lost sight of God's purpose and plan. As he lived here on earth his thoughts were on what is yet to be. But when will these things be? When will the city he looked forward to come be inhabited by God's people?

The answer we find in the Bible, is on the last day. That is, on the day Jesus Christ comes again to judge the living and the dead. On that day he will say to his people, "Well done. Come and inherit the kingdom prepared for

you" (*Matthew 8.21*). It will be the home he said he would go to prepare for his followers (*John 14.6*). We read more about this in the last book of the Bible, in the *Revelation* given to the apostle John. But what we need to grasp is that long before John, Abraham had a glimpse of these things. He saw something of what God was doing. He grasped what God has in store for his people. And what he saw gripped his heart and soul. It transformed his life. From that moment he was a changed man. A man with a different understanding of life; a man with different hopes; a man with a new aim.

Faith

What made the difference for Abraham? It was his encounter with God. In his sovereign purposes God made himself known to Abraham. Abraham discovered not just who God is but how God wants us to live. He discovered God's will for him. And his response was that of a man of faith.

By faith Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees. By faith he travelled on to Haran with his father. There his father died. But by faith Abraham and his family travelled on to the land of promise. By faith there they lived in tents, as foreigners in a foreign land. And by faith he lived in hope; in hope of all that God has promised.

God does not just promise a new start in this life. Certainly he calls us to that. He wants us to forsake our aims, our pleasures and our will. He calls us to deny ourselves and follow Jesus Christ. he calls us to trust in Christ alone for

acceptance with God. And he calls us to live as those who know that on the last day, when history and this world as we know them will cease, he will regenerate all things. He will bring into being a new heavens and earth. He will usher in the final state. And his people shall live for ever with him in the New Jerusalem, the Zion of God.

This hope animated Abraham. He lived depending upon and looking to God for all that he has promised.

We are called to do the same?