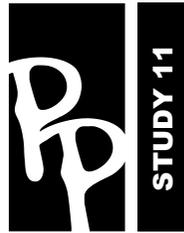


LOOK AT ABRAHAM FROM THE  
OLD TESTAMENT AS AN EXAMPLE



 Galatians 3:6-9

This Study Paper contains the following

- Introduction to the passage
- What these verses mean
- Summary
- A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- Over to you

### Introduction to the passage

The essential truth that Paul is getting over to the Galatian believers is that faith alone will justify a person. They were being tricked into thinking that they now had to do something in order to gain their salvation. In the last study we looked at the questions Paul had asked to make the Galatians think about how they had originally come to faith. By considering their answers they would see that the false teachers were adding to the way they had already come to faith. Paul is not letting go of this vital principle of faith alone and continues by turning to the Bible for further proof. Hebrews chapter 11 describes to us a number of people from human history and the things they did through faith. In his letter to the Galatians Paul concentrates on one such person, Abraham.

### What these verses mean

Verse 6

#### Consider Abraham:

Why did Paul choose to use Abraham as an example? Abraham was an outstanding example of faith. More is said about him in Hebrews 11 than any other person. Abraham is the person to whom the most open information is given about the coming of Christ. It is to Abraham that the Jews looked because they viewed him as the Father of the Jewish nation and were proud that they were descended from him. Abraham

was a good example to bring before the Galatians as one who was justified by faith.<sup>1</sup>

#### *“He believed God,*

Paul is pointing the Galatians back to Genesis 15:4-6. God promised Abraham that one who will come from his own body shall be his heir. This took place when Abraham and his wife Sarah were old, she being past child-bearing age. In Genesis 12:7, when Abraham had left his home in Ur and arrived in Canaan, God said then that he would give the land to Abraham’s descendants. Now, years later in Genesis 15, Sarah is still barren and God re-affirms that promise. Abraham is perplexed; the only person in their household who can be the heir is the servant. Not so, God tells him, and taking Abraham outside, God points to the heaven and the stars. Abraham’s offspring will be as numerous as the stars, impossible to count. As impossible as it must have seemed to Abraham, he believed it to be true.

#### *and it was credited to him as righteousness.”*

Is Paul saying that God looked upon Abraham as being righteous because he believed? Not at all, otherwise the righteousness would be a reward for something that Abraham did, faith by works. The only righteousness that God accepts is the righteousness of Christ. So what did Abraham exactly believe? To answer this we need to take a brief look in the Old Testament.

Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (3:5) says that those who lived before the coming of Christ (i.e. the Old Testament) did not have the gospel fully revealed to them. They did not have the full facts that we have, who live after the death and resurrection of Christ. Yet, those who lived before were fully aware that a substitute had to die to atone for sin. Sin requires the punishment of death and, in the Old Testament, animal sacrifices were the means by which people were being directed to the Messiah to come, Jesus Christ. Hence, at the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry, John the Baptist called Jesus the Lamb of God (John 1:29). The blood of the substitute sacrifice covers the sins and God imputes his righteousness to the one whose sins have been covered. Compare Romans 4:5-6.

So the answer to the question of what did Abraham believe is he believed the promise, but in two ways.

**Firstly**, Abraham believed in the promise fulfilled in Isaac his son.

**Secondly**, in a more distant promise, that of Jesus Christ. Abraham’s faith was not in the earthly promises but in the coming of Christ. Abraham trusted in the blood that would be sacrificed (which Christ

shed at the cross of Calvary, though he would not have known that detail) and cover his sins.

It is an interesting point to note that Abraham was justified by his faith (Gen.15:6) long before he was circumcised (Gen.17:11) or had carried out any religious ceremonies. This is relevant for what Paul is now going to say in verse 7.

Verse 7

**Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.**

Who then are the descendants of Abraham that will number so many that it will be impossible to count? According to the false teaching that was troubling the Galatian believers, the only way for them to share God's blessings and be counted as descendants of Abraham was to be circumcised, like all Jews. They interpreted the promise as being the physical offspring. No, argues Paul, Abraham believed God. Faith was enough. Abraham's heirs are of faith not of blood.

The word "child" can mean "the physical offspring". It can also mean "one who has the same nature as" – e.g. "a child of God". Here, "Abraham's children" means "all those who have the same kind of faith in God as Abraham had" – i.e. all true Christian believers. See Matthew 8:11.

Verse 8

**The Scripture foresaw**

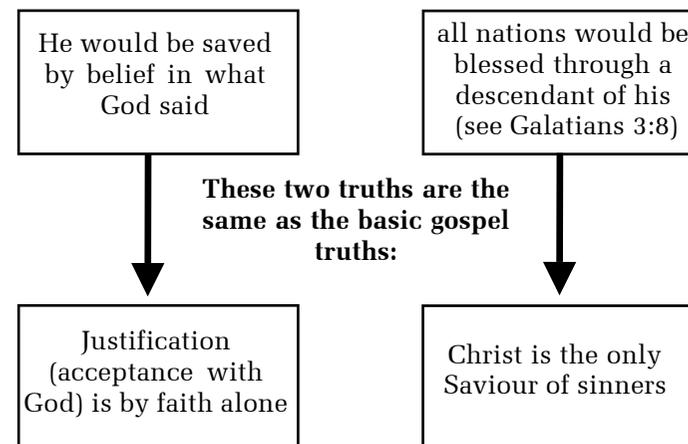
Paul is going to quote from Genesis 12:1–3. But the written Scripture did not actually exist in Abraham's time. Genesis was written later by Moses. So how could it be true that the Scripture "foresees" or "preaches"? Paul is writing about the Scripture as though it were a person. He is giving to Scripture the abilities of God! Scripture may not have existed in Abraham's time, but God's spoken Word did; and, to Paul, the Scripture and God's spoken Word have the same authority. See also Romans 9:17.

**that God would justify the Gentiles by faith,**

The Greek uses the present tense here – i.e. the fact of Gentiles being justified (redeemed) **by faith alone** was a present certainty to God (and his permanent policy), even though it was still a future event in human history at the time when God spoke to Abraham.

**and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham:**

There were two truths made clear to Abraham by God's Word to him (Gen. 12: 1–3)



Abraham's salvation was on the same basis as ours today, though now the truths are revealed in the fuller light of the New Testament.

**"All nations will be blessed through you."**

Literally "the nations". The Jews used this word for "all non-Jews" – i.e. Gentiles. The word was often used as a term of disrespect. Many Jews in New Testament times felt that God had no intention of blessing Gentiles. See the effect produced by this word "nations" ("Gentiles") in Acts 22: 21,22.

Verse 9

**So those who have faith**

See note on verse 7 above. It is those who believe on Christ alone for salvation, not those whose faith is in religious ceremonies like circumcision, who share the blessing of justification given to Abraham (Gen. 15:6).

are blessed along with Abraham,

(i) The Greek present tense is used – i.e. the blessing is happening continuously. Wherever people come to belief, they enjoy immediate justification in God's sight. Believers will never be more righteous in God's sight than they are here and now.

(ii) Believers are not only sons and daughters of Abraham, but they also share in the blessing he received – i.e. justification, and therefore eternal salvation. See verse 29: "**heirs** according to the promise". This is a most important fact that helps us rightly to interpret the Old Testament. E.g:

(a) There is only one true church which included both Old and New Testament saints. The names of all God's people are written in

**the same** book of life (Rev. 20:12-15). There is only **one** olive tree (Rom. 11:17-21) representing the whole church of all time, into which Gentile believers are grafted (the wild branches) to enjoy the same blessings as the natural tree (believing Jews). It cannot be right, therefore, to suggest (as some do) that the Christian church is not referred to in the Old Testament. It cannot be right to suggest (as some do) that the Old Testament refers only to the affairs of the Jewish nation.

- (b) Because Christians are Abraham's spiritual children and share the same blessing of salvation, when God speaks to Abraham he is also speaking to Christians today. See Romans 4:22-24.
- (c) The Old Testament belongs to the church today as much as to the Jews of Old Testament times. What God did in the history of the nation of Abraham's physical descendants teaches us symbolically what he does in the spiritual experience of Abraham's spiritual children – i.e. Christians.
- (d) Many of the prophecies of the Old Testament must now be interpreted, not as referring to the Jews alone, but also as depicting the affairs of the Christian church, using Jewish history as earthly pictures of spiritual truths for Christians today. See, for example, Acts 15:12-18, where James shows that the old prophecy of “the tabernacle of David being rebuilt” is a picture using Jewish symbols of Gentiles being converted and joining the Christian church.

Once these facts are understood, the **whole Bible** becomes a meaningful book to Christians. The gospel is seen to be God's purpose from the beginning and not an afterthought (see Romans 1:2). There is only one church of God's children throughout history. The Old Testament saints wait until all believers, up to the end of time, are redeemed (Heb. 11:40), before the whole church is seen as one glorious church in the new heaven and earth (Is. 65:17, Rom. 8:18-19, 2 Pet. 3:13, Rev. 21:1).

***the man of faith.***

Literally “the believing Abraham”. Emphasis is being placed on the fact that Abraham believed and obeyed God's every word to him and did not try to justify himself in any other way before God. Since Abraham, the founder of the Jewish race, knew the true way of salvation, how is it that these false teachers (Jews) were so ignorant of it?



## Summary

Justification by faith in Christ and not trying to keep the law is the argument Paul is bringing before the Galatians as the way of eternal life. After explaining his dispute with Peter, setting his readers some questions, Paul turns to Scripture for further proof. He sets before them the example of Abraham, who believed God's promises though he had no visual proof of what was to take place. His faith was a spiritual sight, and through this faith he foresaw the coming of Christ and understood what it all meant. How did Abraham know? Because the gospel was preached through the promises God made to him concerning Christ. Some of these promises were physical and were fulfilled through his descendants (the nation of Israel). The Old Testament books, which deal with the life of the nation of Israel, are pictures of the spiritual blessings that come upon all who are Abraham's descendants by faith. Jesus is both the physical and spiritual fulfilment of the promise given to Abraham in that he came through Abraham's lineage (physical) for the benefit of all those who trust in him by faith (spiritual). The true descendants therefore are not those dependent upon the physical lineage, but those who inherit Abraham's faith in Christ. Blessing comes by faith in Christ and by no other means.



## A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

### “Children of Abraham”

#### 1. Faith made Abraham able to obey God in spiritual ways.

If you ask: “How could Abraham behave so differently from the accepted practice, culture and general opinions of his day?”, the answer is: “By faith”. Also:

Christ lives in the believer “by faith” (Eph. 3:17)

The believer is made holy “by faith” (Acts 26:18)

The believer prays the prayer “of faith” (James 5:15)

The believer fights the good fight “of faith” (1 Tim. 6:12)

The believer obeys with the obedience “of faith” (Rom. 16:26)

The believer perseveres by the life “of faith” (Rom. 1:17)

The believer dies “in faith” (Heb. 11:13)

Whoever is a child of Abraham has faith

Wherever faith is, it will have an effect in the life of that person

## 2. How did Abraham’s faith affect his life?

He was content to obey God’s commands (Gen. 12:4)

He continually sought God’s blessing (Gen. 15:2,8)

His hope depended on God’s mercy and power (Rom. 4:18-21)

He patiently waited until God was ready to act (Gen. 21:5)

He counted nothing too dear to give to God (Gen.22:12)

Every believer has the same “precious faith” (2 Peter 1:1)

A little banana has the same taste as a large one. Even a young believer’s faith will have these characteristics, as will also the faith of a mature believer.

Is our faith like Abraham’s faith?

Only if it is can we claim to be his children (i.e. Christians).

### Note

These points come from a sermon preached by a famous preacher who lived 1586-1647 called Thomas Hooker. So we see that believers today belong to a family of believers of all times of history and in all places on earth, who all believe the same biblical truths. This encourages us to be faithful to the gospel.



### Over to you

Do you plan your preaching so that your congregation receives a balanced diet of spiritual food?

How much do you preach from the Old Testament?

Do you use illustrations from the Bible to help your people understand biblical truth?