

Know Your Faith – The Patriarchs

Sunday 2nd November 2025

Readings: Psalm 105:1-15, Genesis 12:1-3 & 17:4-6, Genesis 22:2 & 6-12, Genesis 32:22-30

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Question: What is a patriarch?

We are continuing to examine key aspects and understandings of the Christian faith, so we are able to talk about it with people in an intelligent and informed manner. This morning we are going to talk about the Patriarchs.

Most families have someone or a couple lovingly referred to as the patriarchs of the family. Normally they are looked up to and revered for the work they have done in bringing the family together or establishing the family in a new way, maybe bringing the family to a new country as my wife's parents did. The Greek of the word patriarch is a mix of two Greek words "patria" meaning family, and "archein", meaning to rule. In ancient times the patriarch was normally older in age, male and ruled the family. In Biblical terms, "patriarch" refers back to three distinct people, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, although some scholars have argued up to seven more could be added to this list. Patriarchs are revered, respected and looked up to not just because of what they achieved but because of the character and example they exhibited in doing so. It is this critical aspect of their legacy that one might feel many world leaders are not aware of today.

When we come to Abram (later called Abraham), we know from the Jewish Midrash Genesis Rabbah and Joshua 24:2 that Abram's father Terah, was an idol maker and worshipper. Abram followed the strange call, of a previously unknown but sought after God, to leave his family home and country to become the father of a great nation. It wasn't the mechanics of how God used Abram to go about establishing a new people for himself that set Abram apart it was something else: it was Abram's heart, his faithfulness and obedience.

The apostle Paul devotes the whole of what we have as Chapter 4 of the Epistle to the Romans to speak about Abraham. Critically, Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Romans 4:3). What is righteousness? The old missionary definition is useful; it is to be made right with God. Now here is an important understanding about the Christian faith. There is always both a technical and legal position and simultaneously an ongoing developing position. We always have both. Let's explain that. To be righteous before God requires our sin to be dealt with. Only in Jesus can this be done as He has become our substitute, taking our sin upon His shoulders, setting us free from sin and right with God. When we believe the Word of God, when we first repent of our sin and turn from our life without God we are made right with God. The case against us is dealt with and the penalty taken by Jesus. In Genesis 12 when God calls Abram and Abram believes God and leaves everything to follow God's call his past is forgiven and he is made right with God. It is a starting

place that required Abram to step out in faith. Nothing lasting can be achieved without faith. Abram trusted God and believed His Word and it was counted to him as righteousness. But it doesn't end there. It was the starting point. Just as when we give out lives to Jesus and are baptised, we are forgiven and set free but that's not all, that's just the starting point of the journey. When we dedicate our children, we are committing ourselves to giving our children a good start on this path. As we follow the path we grow in God and in faith.

We are made righteous in a continuous sense in each act of faith and obedience. The technical term for the bigger process is 'sanctification', throughout our lives God is making us His Holy people. We are called to put God first in thought and deed. This is not always easy. First before what? Before everything and everyone.

During Abraham's life he was called on to work this out. Now we might note that Abraham was 75 years of age when God called him ... so don't worry you are too old to be used by God! He was closer to 85 when the second great test came. God had promised he would be the father of a great nation but he and Sarah were childless. In Genesis 15:1-6 we see that Abraham asks God if Eliezer of Damascus, who would inherit his estate, would be the father of the nation but God said that a son of his own flesh and blood would be his heir. As unlikely as it sounded Abraham trusted God and again it is credited to him as righteousness.

How often do we let the things of this world, the depreciating word whispered in our ear, that something cannot be done, stop us doing what God is quickening our spirit toward? We believe in the God who can do the impossible don't we? Why pray at all if we don't believe God can and will do it? Crazy as it seemed at his age, Abraham trusted God and would live to see the promise fulfilled.

Abraham's faith was to be tested even further. In Genesis 22 we see that with only one son, Abraham was asked to sacrifice that son upon an altar. Now while abhorrent to us today, Abraham had come from a pagan Canaanite culture where child sacrifice was normal to appease the gods or win their favour. Irrespective, taking the life of his only biological son must have been a colossal challenge. In faith that God knew what He was doing, Abraham was up to the challenge. In Hebrews 11:17-19 we are told how Abraham saw the situation.

¹⁷ *By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son,* ¹⁸ *even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."* ¹⁹ *Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.*

Abraham's logic was simple. God is faithful to His Word. God had said that the nations would come through his seed, that is, Isaac. Therefore, if he were to take his life then

God would simply raise the child up again. An early typology for the Messiah is not astray here. Of course, God stayed Abraham's hand in the act of sacrificing Isaac and provided a ram instead, but Abraham did not know God was going to do that. He acted, in faith, on what he was told.

In each of these three ways Abraham demonstrated great faith and determination to follow God's instruction in life; to live by faithfulness to God's Word. Abraham was a patriarch in the truest sense of the word; not only as a founder, physically, but because of his great faith and responsiveness to God's voice.

The real development of the nation came, as promised through his son Isaac and grandson Jacob. These two are also regarded as primary patriarchs.

Isaac is not only the escapee of Abraham's sacrifice and the link between generations but also regarded as a patriarch because of his faith. Many children like to rebel against their parents' faith, at least while they are young, until they grow up and make it their own. Let's face it, Isaac had every reason to want to think his dad had gone mad going to sacrifice him. But Isaac saw the faith of his father and how God rewarded and blessed Abraham and how Abraham grew in faith and person. It wasn't so much that faith was passed on but that Isaac saw the faith of his father, the priorities in his life and how God blessed him and the family and Isaac wanted that for himself and his offspring. It is clear from what happens with his sons around blessing that the continuity of blessing between generations was regarded as critical.

When we come to Jacob we come to the last of the traditional patriarchs. Some of you will remember Jacob from the musical "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat". Great show by the way of you haven't seen it. Jacob had twelve sons who became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. The promise of God to Abraham came true in the most amazing way. These descendants would not only multiply like crazy, they would also eventually inherit the promised land and divide it up amongst themselves. Jacob had received the promise made in God's covenant with Abraham, believed it and he and his descendants furthered it and saw it worked out. But it wasn't easy. In Genesis 32:22-32 we have the incredible account of Jacob wrestling with God all night (a pre-incarnate Jesus if you can get your head around that. Jesus the wrestling Messiah!) Jacob is blessed through the struggle, although, ever after, he will carry a limp. Jacob goes on to live the blessing that God pours out on him and his family. Wrestling with God through the night is a reflection of honesty and integrity and a good lesson for us all. In Genesis 28:10-17 we see that Jacob also gets great insight from God through amazing visions, such as the ladder to heaven, and he gets an affirmation that the covenant promise made to his grandfather Abraham will be fulfilled through his lineage.

These three patriarchs demonstrate faithfulness across generations. They are to be an encouragement and example to us all. Following God is not always easy and

stepping out in faith requires courage and determination. This is especially true when challenges present themselves and the lacking in faith or worse want to distract or divert your attention from the goal. Jesus even had to wrestle with this from His close disciples at one stage when they tried to divert Him from going to Jerusalem (Matthew 16:21-23). God, however, is faithful. God encourages and rewards those who are faithful to Him. This is the story of the Patriarchs. Can we live up to their example?

Prayer: Lord help us to ever be faithful to Your Word and attentive to Your voice. Give us the faith to follow your call and to trust in You. Strengthen our feet for the path and our will for the battle each and every day we pray. That we might honour you and the memory of those who have gone before.

Amen