

Abraham – a man who fulfilled God’s purposes for his life

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Are you satisfied with your life? Do you have a central joy in being alive?

Do you have deep peace in your heart? Do you have a sense of purpose for your life?

When you wake up in the morning do you say “Yay! What a wonderful day lies before me”?

At the end of your life will you look back and say “Thank you Lord. It was wonderful to be on earth for the period of time you gave me”?

If you can say YES to these questions you’re probably fulfilling God’s purposes for your life. You have satisfaction, meaning and enjoyment in life because you are doing what God created you to do.

Abraham was one who also fulfilled God’s purposes for his life.

In this study we will explore aspects of Abraham’s life to see how and why his life was so effective. Abraham had his ups and downs and, no doubt, struggled to do things God’s way (as most of us do) but in the end he was successful in doing what God wanted him to do – and now we remember him as the father of faith.

Overview of Abraham’s life

Abraham is one of the most important people in the Bible. His life story is recorded in Genesis 11:27-25:10.

Abram, the son of Terah, was born in the city of Ur in modern-day Iraq. There he married Sarai and the family moved to Haran in modern-day Turkey. In response to God’s leading they then moved on to Canaan in modern day Israel where they lived as nomads. There was a famine in Canaan so the family went to Egypt, but they were driven out of there and moved back to Canaan. Abram and Sarai couldn’t have children so Abram had a son, Ishmael, with Hagar, an Egyptian who was Sarah’s servant. Ishmael became the father of the Arabs.



But God had a very important purpose for Abram!

God made a covenant with him saying that Abram was to be *the father of many nations* (Genesis 17:5), and that *all nations on earth will be blessed* through him. Genesis 22:17, 18. At the time Abram was 99 and Sarai was 90, and they couldn’t have children.

Abram believed God when given this promise, and he became the father of all those who would have faith. In recognition of this God changed their names to Abraham and Sarah, and they had a son, Isaac, in their old age. Isaac’s son, Jacob, became the father of the Israelites, and the promise was fulfilled as the nation of Israel was established, and as Jesus, God’s Son was brought into the world as a Jew, bring salvation to all who have faith in Him.

Abraham died at the age of 175 and was buried beside his wife Sarah in the Cave of Machpelah, in modern day Hebron, Jordan.

We can learn a lot from Abraham; especially how he trusted God and sought to fulfill the purposes that God had for his life. We’ll do this by exploring Genesis Chapters 11-25.

Abraham's early life. Genesis 11:27-14:24.

Abraham's name was originally Abram, meaning "exalted father". His father, Terah, was probably part of a moon cult in Ur, a city near the mouth of the Euphrates River. Abram married Sarai (meaning "contentious") but she was *barren*, and could have *no children*.

Terah took his family (including Abram and Sarai) to go to Canaan, *but when they came to Haran, in Assyria, they settled there*.

God then called Abram to go to Canaan and made him a wonderful promise:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

So Abram left, as the Lord had told him.



Abram was willing to do what God wanted him to do

If we want to fulfill God's purpose for our lives we must be willing to do whatever He wants us to do. Many Christians are so wrapped up with their own lives that whatever God wants hardly gets a thought. It wasn't like that with Abram. When God told him to take his family to another land he was willing to go.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. Hebrews 11:8

All through his life willingness to do what God wanted him to do was a feature of Abraham's life. Perhaps that's why he achieved so much?

Abram heard God's voice

Abram heard God's voice and was clear about what God wanted of him.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Genesis 12:1-3

To hear God's voice we need to take time to seek God's will and to listen. As we wait on God we are asking Him "Lord what is it that you want of me today? Next week? With my life? Lord. I'm listening. Speak to me".

We know that success in life starts and finishes with doing the will of God because only what He initiates and blesses will prosper and last. *Whatsoever is born of God overcomes the world.* 1 John 5:4.

Abram recognized this. He listened to God and clearly heard God speak to Him. He knew exactly where God was leading him and what God wanted him to do.

Abram was 75 years old when he set out from Haran. He took his family and all his possessions, and his brother Lot also went with them. Entering Canaan, Abram went first to Shechem, and God appeared to him at Moreh. They were obviously a little nervous because the Caananites were living there, but God reassured them by repeating that He was giving the land to Abram and his offspring. Abram built an altar to the Lord at Shechem, then moved to Bethel and built another altar there. He *called on the name of the Lord* declaring his allegiance to the Lord in what was then a pagan land.

There was a famine in Canaan so Abram *went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was so severe*. He was concerned that the Egyptians might kill him to take his beautiful his wife Sarai so he said she was his sister. Sarai was taken to Pharaoh and Abram was treated well because the Egyptians thought he was Sarai's sister. In response *the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh's household*. Pharaoh summoned Abram and he confessed what he had done. Abram and his family were sent out of Egypt and headed back into the Negev, the southern part of Canaan. Truth always triumphs! Deception is never a good strategy.

Abram didn't always trust God

Abram had weaknesses, as we all do. Even though he was a great man he didn't always trust God. One example of this was when he went to Egypt and tried to manipulate the circumstances in his own wisdom and strength. He got himself into lots of trouble.

Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you." When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman. And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels. But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abraham's wife Sarai. So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!" Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had. Genesis 12:10-20.

Abram didn't trust God to look after his family. He tried to organize circumstances on his own by being devious and deceptive. It didn't work, and he got found out. But God was watching over Abram and Sarai and rescued them. This wouldn't have been necessary if they'd trusted God and let Him lead them.

Trusting God means that we recognise that God loves us and wants the best for us. We believe that He has our best interests at heart and we submit our lives into His care. We don't try to manipulate circumstances to suit our ideas of what we think should happen.

Back in Canaan Abram became *very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold* and continued his nomadic way of life. The land could not support Abram and Lot's families so they decided to separate. Lot chose the plain of Jordan because it was *well watered, like a garden of the Lord* and went to the east. Abram took the land to the west and God reaffirmed his promise regarding this land: *All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring for ever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.* Abram finally settled at Hebron, close to modern day Jerusalem.

Lot settled in Sodom, but was captured when a group of local kings overtook Sodom and Gomorrah. When Abram heard that this had happened he gathered a group of soldiers and went to rescue Lot. He *brought back his relative Lot and his possessions, together with the women and the other people.* When Abram returned home after defeating the local kings he was met by Melchizedek, king of Salem (now called Jerusalem). Melchizedek was also a priest and he blessed Abram. In return Abram gave him a tenth of the spoils of war that he had captured. He didn't keep the rest but, grateful for God's mercies, gave away all that he had gained except for what his men had eaten and the share that belonged to those who supported him. This incident is interpreted in Hebrews Chapter 7 and 8 where Jesus is shown to be a High Priest like Melchizedek. It explains that Jesus' priesthood in the New Covenant is "better" than that of the priests under the Old Covenant. Abram gave a tenth of the spoils of war to Melchizedek; *a priest like the Son of God.* Now the former regulations are *set aside* and Jesus introduces a *better hope* because He lives forever and has a permanent priesthood.

God's covenant with Abram. Genesis 15:1-21:34

Abram was concerned that he had no children and that Eliezer, his servant, would become his heir. (The custom of the day was that if a couple were childless they could adopt a servant to be their heir, and receive their inheritance. Then if a son was born naturally he would replace the servant as the heir). God encouraged Abram by explaining more clearly how He would fulfill His promise that he would bring blessing to all peoples.

God said that *a son coming from your body will be your heir.* God showed Abram the heavens and said that as the stars *so shall your offspring be.*

And Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness.

Abram believed God

Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness

This was a very important moment in history. Even though Abram was old and his wife was barren he believed God, and, on the basis of this, God declared him to be righteous in His sight. Abram thus became the father of those who could have a relationship with God, by faith. In the New Testament this is called *justification*. We are justified (declared righteous in God's sight, and thus able to have a relationship with Him) by faith when we *believe on the Lord Jesus Christ*. We don't have to fulfill any religious rites, or obey any laws, and we certainly can't be righteous by 'trying to be good'. We simply put our trust in Jesus. God then declares us to be righteous and we become His children and can have a wonderful relationship with Him. See Romans Chapter 4:1 -5:11 and Galatians 3:6-9. Abram was the first to do this so he is called the *father of all who believe*. Romans 4:11.

Abram believed God when He promised to do something that seemed impossible and so can we! *Jesus said "All things are possible with God."* Mark 10:27. If you put your trust in God and believe what He says, He can do wonderful things in and through you. And that's when life becomes exciting!

Abram wanted to know how he could take possession of the land God had given him. God showed him in a dream that his descendants will live in the land, *be enslaved and ill-treated for four hundred years*; and then return to their land. (This was fulfilled when the children of Israel were taken into captivity in Egypt for 400 years and were then brought back to the Promised Land by Moses).

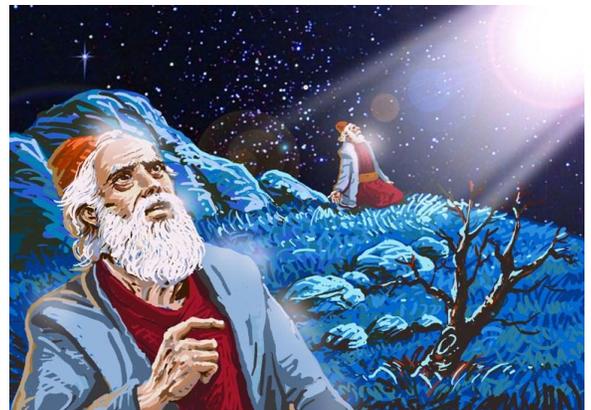
But Abram and Sarai still had no children!

Sarai desperately wanted a child and gave Abram the opportunity to start a family with her servant Hagar. Unfortunately Abram agreed and Ishmael was born. Ishmael means *God hears* indicating that the Lord had heard Sarai's misery. When Hagar found she was pregnant she despised Sarai, and Sarai retaliated by mistreating her. As a result Hagar fled into the desert. The Lord told her to go back and submit to her mistress and that he would give her descendants too numerous to count. Ishmael became the father of the Arab peoples who would *live in hostility towards all his brothers*, a situation that continues to this day. *Abram was eighty six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael*. How different would history have been if Abram had continued to believe God, rather than trying to sort out his destiny in his own strength!

When Abram was 99, the Lord appeared to him and reaffirmed His promise that he would have a son. *I am God Almighty (El Shaddai); walk before Me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between Me and you and will greatly increase your numbers*. God then gave more details of His covenant with Abram:

- He would be *the father of many nations*. In recognition of this God changed his name from Abram (exalted father) to Abraham (father of many).
- He would be *very fruitful*. Nations and kings would come from him.
- The covenant would be an *everlasting covenant* between God and Abraham's descendants.
- He would be given the *whole land of Canaan* as an *everlasting possession* to him and his descendants.
- God would be their God.

The sign of this covenant would be that *every male among you shall be circumcised*. Anyone who would not be circumcised would break the covenant and be *cut off* from its blessings.



God also changed the name of Sarai (contentious) to Sarah (Princess) and indicated that she would be *the mother of nations*. Abraham laughed at this because Sarah was 90 years old. But God said that Sarah would indeed bear a son and Abraham was to call him Isaac (meaning he laughs). The covenant would be established through Isaac, but Ishmael would also be blessed and become a *great nation*.

In obedience Abraham circumcised Ishmael and all males in his household and then waited for God to fulfill His promises.

The Lord appeared to Abraham near Mamre as he sat in front of his tent on a hot day and reaffirmed His promise. Three *men* (possibly angels) came to Abraham seeking water and rest. Abraham offered them hospitality and the Lord repeated His promise that Abraham and Sarah would have a child, this time saying that it would *be about this time next year*. Sarah overheard this and burst out laughing because they were *old and well advanced in years* and she was *past the age of childbearing*. The Lord asked why Sarah laughed and said that nothing was too hard for Him. He would return to them *at the appointed time next year* and Sarah would *have a son*.

The three men were on their way to Sodom and Gomorrah, two evil cities. God decided to tell Abraham what He was about to do because He had such a special relationship with him. *Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just; so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what He has promised him.*

God said He was going to judge Sodom and Gomorrah for their evil ways. Abraham pleaded that God would not do this because there must be some righteous people in the cities, and it would not be right to judge them. *Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?* God relented for the sake of 50 righteous people. Abraham then pleaded for 45, then 40, then 30, then 20, and then 10. This shows how God listens to our prayers, and how we can be bold in asking Him for things that are aligned with God's nature, in this case, His justice.

In due course, two angels went to Sodom and met Lot at the gate of the city. Lot invited them to stay at his house and the men of Sodom gathered calling for the men to come outside so they could *have sex with them*. Lot was frightened and offered his daughters instead. When the evil Sodomites tried to storm the house the angels struck them blind, and Lot and his family fled from the city. The angels said that *the outcry to the Lord against its people is so great that He has sent us to destroy it.*

Lot didn't want to go into the mountains and was allowed to go to the small town of Zoar and there his life would *be spared*. Then *the Lord rained down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah and overthrew those cities*. Lot's wife looked back (when told not to) and was turned into a pillar of salt. Next morning Abraham saw how God had *destroyed the cities of the plain*, but had honoured His promise not to judge everyone who lived there, by bringing Lot *out of the catastrophe*.



The evidence of these monumental events can still be seen today in the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah, and in the pillar of salt that was Lot's wife.

Lot was afraid to stay in Zoar and lived in the mountains with his two daughters. The two daughters wanted to preserve their family line and so got their father drunk and lay with him. *So both of Lot's daughters became pregnant by their father*. The children of the older daughter became the Moabites, and the children of the younger daughter became the Ammonites. They settled to the east in modern day Jordan and have been enemies of the Israelites from that time on.



Abraham moved on and lived for a while in Gerar. Again he tried to deceive by saying Sarah was his sister. Abimelech, the king of Gerar, tried to take Sarah but God told him that she was married and he returned her to Abraham. Next morning Abimelech called Abraham in asking *How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should not be done*. Abraham explained that he had done it out of fear and that Sarah was actually his sister, as well as his wife. Abimelech forgave Abraham and Sarah and allowed them to go *wherever you like* in his land. He gave them money and *completely vindicated* them. *Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife and his slave girls so they could have children again, for the Lord had closed up every womb in Abimelech's household because of Abraham's wife Sarah*. Abraham may have been a man of great faith, but he was also a man who was affected by fears, and who tried to do things in his own strength, apart from God. Most Christians are a bit like that!

Later, Abimelech asked for Abraham to make a treaty with him because he recognized that *God was with him* in everything he did. The treaty was sealed with an oath made beside a well. The place was called Beersheba (meaning *well of the oath*).

Then God fulfilled His promise to Abraham and Sarah. *The Lord did for Sarah what He had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave him the name Isaac meaning he laughs. Sarah said God has brought me laughter! All who hear about this will laugh with me.* This was when Abraham was 100 and Sarah 90! Nothing is too hard for the Lord!

Isaac was circumcised when he was 8 days old. Later, Abraham held a feast to celebrate Isaac's weaning and Sarah noticed that Ishmael was mocking Isaac. She wanted Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away so Ishmael would never share in the inheritance with Isaac. Abraham was distressed by this but God re-assured him by saying that a great nation would come through Isaac (the nation of Israel), but another great nation would also come through Ishmael (the Arab nations).

Hagar and Ishmael were sent away and they lived in the desert. *God was with Ishmael as he grew up.*

Genesis 22:1-24. Abraham's faith is tested

God then *tested Abraham* by commanding him to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as a *burnt offering* on Mt Moriah. Abraham had waited 25 years for God to fulfill His promise, and now he was being asked to sacrifice the one who was his heir, and through whom would come a mighty nation. But Abraham realized what it would mean if he did not obey God so he prepared for the sacrifice in obedience to the Lord. When Isaac asked *Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?* Abraham replied that *God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering* (which He did when He provided Jesus, His Son, as the Lamb of God that would take away the sin of the world. John 1:29).

Just as Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac an angel stopped him by calling out *Abraham!* God saw that Abraham truly feared God because he had not *withheld even your beloved son from me*". Abraham noticed a ram caught in a nearby thicket and used that for the sacrifice instead of Isaac. Abraham named the area where this took place *the Lord will provide*, which is on the Temple Mount in modern day Jerusalem. So Abraham passed the test by showing that he absolutely trusted in the Lord. As a result God restated His promise that Abraham's descendants would be *as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore* and that all nations on the earth would be blessed because Abraham had obeyed Him.



Abraham obeyed God

When Abram heard God's voice he obeyed: even though what God asked him to do was difficult.

There could not be a much greater test than being told to sacrifice his only son, Isaac:

God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

This was a great test of Abraham's faith but he obeyed God. He was willing to do what God wanted and he passed the test! This showed God what Abraham's heart was like: that Abraham was faithful, trustworthy and obedient. Abraham's obedience then opened the way for God to work mightily on his behalf so that Isaac didn't need to be sacrificed

Through the good times and difficult ups/downs, Abraham knew what God wanted him to do; he believed God; he trusted God; and he obeyed God.

And the result was that he achieved what God wanted him to do. What God promised actually came to pass.

We all go through tests and trials. Sometimes it is hard to obey God at these times, but obedience is always best! When God shows us what He wants us to do and we obey Him He can then do mighty things in and through us.

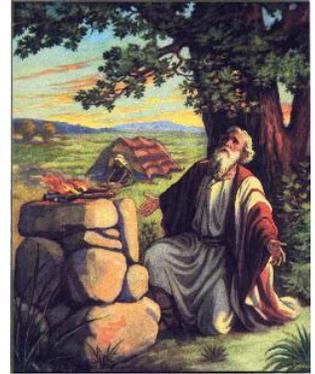
Sarah died at the age of 127 and Abraham purchased a field from the Hittites as a burial ground. The Hittites held him in such high regard that they wanted to give the field to him, but Abraham insisted on paying for it. Sarah was buried in a cave of Machpelah in the field.

Later Abraham took another wife, Keturah, and she bore him many sons. Abraham left everything to Isaac and gave gifts to the other sons and sent them away to the east.

Abraham lived to be 175 years old and died *at a good old age* and was buried with Sarah in the cave of Machpelah.

Abraham is acknowledged as the father of the Israelites (through Isaac), and the father of the Arabs (through Ishmael). He is also described as the *friend of God* (2 Chronicles 20:7; James 2:23) which shows that he had a very special personal relationship with God. Out of this relationship came God's promise that *all the families of the earth will be blessed* through him. (Genesis 12:3).

Even though Abraham's faith was sorely tested at times he trusted God to the end and all the promises that God made to him were fulfilled. Abraham is now recognized as not just the father of the Israelites and the Arabs. He is *the father of all who believe*. (Romans 4:11). His descendants are all those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and so are saved. Their number is indeed *as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore* and *all nations on the earth* are indeed *blessed* because Abraham trusted God.



Abraham is one who truly fulfilled God's purposes for his life!

He has shown us that faith involves

- being willing to do what God wants
- hearing God's voice
- believing God
- trusting God
- obeying God.

So when you know what God wants you to do, be like Abraham and do it!

Discussion questions

1. Abraham is recognized as the "father" of the Jews, the Arabs and of all those who have faith in Jesus Christ. Explain how he came to have this status; how it demonstrated God's faithfulness in honouring His promises, and the implications for Jews, Arabs and Christians today.
2. What was the covenant that God made with Abraham? How was this covenant fulfilled? Is this covenant relevant for us today?
3. Describe how Abraham demonstrated his faith in God at different times in his life. What can we learn from this about trusting God?
4. What is the meaning of the names of the following people in the account of Abraham's life: Abram, Abraham, Sarai, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, Jacob? Why do you think God changed some of these people's names?
5. Abraham is a great example of someone who fulfilled God's purposes for his life. What were God's purposes for Abraham? How were they revealed to him? How did he respond when he knew God's purposes? What made him effective/ineffective in achieving God's purposes for his life?
6. What are God's purposes for your life? How were these purposes revealed to you? (or how are they being revealed, or how could they be revealed?). What are you doing to ensure you fulfill God's purposes for your life?
7. Identify all New Testament references to Abraham. How do these add to your understanding of his significance in history, and his status as *the father of all who believe*?