

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Romans 4:1-12 **“In The Steps Of Father Abraham”**

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(15th Sunday After Pentecost)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIIB1-2: ROMANS 4:1-12 "IN THE STEPS OF FATHER ABRAHAM"

4 Units: vv.1-8, 9-12, 13-16a, 16b-25

1) 4:1-8 HOW RIGHTEOUSNESS WAS RECKONED TO ABRAHAM THROUGH TRUST.

Ancient Writers Often Used Noble Examples From Past To Make A Case; Older Is Better!

a) vv.1-3 Question: What Scripture Says: Genesis 15:6.

4:1-12 = Midrash On Gen. 15:6b, Is. 41:8

1 Q1 What then shall we say about Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? Biology/Genealogy: Jews, Gen. 11-25 //James 2:20-24, Heb. 11, 1 Clement 10 On Abraham As An Example works (4x), Intro + Quote, Jews Extolled Abraham's Obedience False Alternative, Affirmation + Correction but not before God Paul's Addition? //3:27-29, Horizontal, Not Vertical

[S1] 3a Q2 For what does the Scripture say? PART ONE: ABRAHAM'S RESTORED RELATIONSHIP Question + Scripture (v.3/v.9)

b A2 "Abraham believed God, Credited (logizomai, Math/Commerce Term, 8x): vv. 3b, 4b, 5b, 6b, 8b, 9b, 10a, 11b) and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." First Text = Single Verse: Gen. 15:6, Chap. 17 On Circumcision, Gal. 3:6 First Covenant: Relationship Is Trust-Based, Gen.15:6, 25:6 v. Model Of Works Righteousness, Gen. 22, 1 Macc 2:52, Sir. 44:19-21, Jub. 21:2-3, 23:10

4 b) v.4 Comment 1: Works And Wages (Earn). // Sir. 51:30, 44:20, Right Relationship Is A Gift Now to one who works, Analogy, Contract/Commercial Metaphor: Wages Are Not A Gift! his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. Something Earned And Owed Worker (Wages/Credited/due), Believer (Faith/Credied/Righteousness)

5 b') v.5 Comment 2: Not Works But Trust (Gift). Gift Of Restored Relationship To The Wicked And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, Idolater (1:18), 5:6. Offensive: ungodly his faith is reckoned as righteousness. 3:24, New Sense: Not Credited As Due But Reckoned As Gift

The Issue = Whom Do You Trust? How Does It Show? Faith Is Not A Work!

a') vv.6-8 What Scripture Says: Psalm 32:1-2 (31:1-2 LXX).

Argument Form = Torah + Psalm

6 [S2] So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man Intro (v.6) + Quote, Claims To Represent A Valid Tradition to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: Righteousness Defined As Blessedness = Sins Forgiven 7 "Blessed are those who iniquities (lawless deeds) are forgiven, Song Of A Forgiven King and whose sins are covered; Rabbinic Method 1: Same Word (reckon) In 2 Places: gezera shawah 8 blessed is the man Righteousness Is The Blessing Of Forgiveness against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin" Ps. 32:1-2, Link Word = blessed (v.8a/v.9a) All This When Abraham Was Still A Gentile!

2) vv.9-12 THE PLACE AND MEANING OF CIRCUMCISION FOR JEW & GENTILE.

Blessing (Gk. makarismos) = Verbal Link to vv.7-8

a) v.9a Question 1: Is The Blessing For Jews Only Or Also Gentiles?

Jew 9a Q1 Is this blessing pronounced only upon the circumcised (Jews), Audience? Forgiveness/Righteousness or also upon the uncircumcised (Gentiles)? Chiasm, Jew-Gentile (a. v.9) // Gentile-Jew (a' vv.11b-12) Trust Is The Most Basic Human Response (E. Erikson) b We say that "faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." 4:3b, (Age 70?) Before Circumcision Sign Restates Gen. 15:6 As Summary

b) v.10a Two Questions: How And When?

10a Q2 How: How then was it reckoned (credited) to him? When Was Blessing (Forgiveness) Credited? *Rabbinic Model 2: dabar halamed me inyano (text read in context) b Q3 When: Was it before/ or after he had been circumcised? Which Is First? Foundational? Ring a (how)-b (when)//b' (when)-a' (how)

b') vv.10c-11a Two Answers In Reverse Order: When And How?

Faith Preceded Both Circumcision And The Law = More Basic

c A3 When: It was not after,/ but before he was circumcised./ As A Gentile! Sequence Is Significant Does This Relativize Sacraments? 11a A2 How: He received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness (Age 99), Outward Sign/Inward Grace which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. *Gen. 15:6 Is Before Gen. 17:10-14, 24 New Meaning Of Circumcision: Confirmatory Identity, Read In Light Of Christ All True Faith Is Thus Abrahamic, Continuity Of Gentile Faith With Abraham!

A1 a') vv.11b-12 Answer 1: Yes! The Blessing Is For Both Gentiles And Jews //v.16.

b Gentile The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised Density Of Terms and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them (Gentiles), Trust The Divine Physician Abraham Is Example To All & Father Of Covenant People Jew 12 and likewise the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised Abraham As 1st Gentile Christian! but also follow the example of the faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised (Jews).

A Brief Treatment Of IIIB', Romans 4:1-12

The current section is III. 3:21-4:25 as marked by a turn of argument (*But now*, 3:21a) and restatement of the thesis (1:16-17) concerning the revelation of God's righteousness. The structure is a 4:2 ring pattern (A. 3:21-26, B. 3:27-31 // **B' 4:1-12**, A' 4:13-23). Exposition of God's apart-from-the-law righteousness is in the frames (A//A'), the questions and answers of diatribe (B//B') at the center. Thought unit B' 4:1-12 falls into two parts: 1) vv.1-8, 2) vv.9-12. Inclusions that frame the paragraphs are *forefather* (v.1) // *the father of all—father* (vv.11b-12), *believed* (v.3b) // *believe* (11b), *faith* (v.5 // v.12). Eight uses of *reckon* (Gk. *logizomai*) sustain the theme of Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God, and it was *reckoned to him* as righteousness" (vv. 3b, 4b, 5b, 6b, 8b, 9b, 10a, 11b). The origin of the term is commercial, but here the ledger is relational rather than financial because it involves a covenant initiated by the God who offers Abraham— an ungodly polytheist— the gift of a new relationship which disrupts all former loyalties (i.e. the story of Genesis 12-25). Abraham does not resist but trusts the Giver, and on that basis, God *reckons* that Abraham is now in a right relationship. Nothing is imparted or imputed to Abraham; this is no legal fiction but a new, transforming friendship full of ups and downs (Is. 4:8, 2 Chron. 20:7). Abraham is not yet a more moral or better man, but he is now in trust relationship with the God who will work with him to create a new tribe (i.e. the Jews) to bless the whole human family. Even God has to start somewhere!

The first paragraph (vv.1-8) is structured in a 4:2 ring (a-b//b'-a') with *righteousness* (v.3b//v.6b) as an inclusion. Scripture quotes (Gen. 15:6 [Torah] and Ps. 32:1-2 [Psalms]) open and close the unit (a//a') invoking two heroes: Father Abraham, King David. The word *works* is used four times (vv.2, 4, 5, 6), setting up the contrast. In the center Paul distinguishes what is worked for and thus earned (b. v.4) from what is not earned but received in trust (b' v.5). The Q & A of diatribe is used in vv.1-2, 3. While there are divergent opinions on the format (one question or two) and translation of v.1a, this much is clear. Paul is asking leading questions, and Abraham is the progenitor of all Jews. Paul's assumes what is oldest as most reliable. So what was the nature of Abraham's relationship with our Jewish God? If God chose him for character and behavior (i.e. *his works*), there's a credit on his side of the ledger (v.2a), as if God looked down and said, "There's a good one. I'll start with him." But Abraham is *ungodly*, says Paul (v.5), a pagan polytheist with all their despicable practices (cf. 1:18-32). Nothing commends him. Others later see him as meritorious (Sirach 51:30, 44:20), *but not before God*, says Paul. The miracle is that Abraham trusts, and even that is God-enabled. A pagan bedouin and the true God are now *in cahoots!* And with a careful theological introduction (v.6) to set up his second quote (vv.7-8), Paul uses the link word *reckon* to announce the primary benefit of Abe's new friendship. It is, as a guilty King David wrote, that *iniquities are forgiven* and *sins covered*; God cancels debts and rewrites accounts. My past does not determine our future. What Abraham brings is naked reliance, and even that is not to his credit but the enabling work of God within him. Abe was a pagan Gentile when called and set him right. Thus the Jews begin.

The second paragraph (2. vv.9-12) also uses the Q & A format. The structure is a 4:2 ring (a-b//b'-a') with *faith* (v.9b//v.12b), *reckoned* (v.9b//v.11b) and the *Jew/Gentile* contrast (v.9a //vv.11b-12) as inclusions. The word *blessing* (v.6//v.9a) links the two paragraphs. The question of a. v.9a is answered at the end in a' vv.11b-12. The *How* and *When* questions of b. v.10a are answered in reverse order in b' vv.10c-11a. So is the blessing for Jews only, or also Gentiles? To ground the argument, Paul repeats his earlier citation of Gen. 15:6, "We said that 'faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.'" But how and when? It was before and not after he was circumcised twenty-nine years later. What is older is foundational; a prior relationship is later marked with a physical scar. Abraham is thus the model for both Gentiles and Jews, those who have the new relationship with the Jewish mark and those who have the mark and the relationship. It is God' grace that elects and saves; we are enabled to trust, Jew or Gentile!

IN THE STEPS OF FATHER ABRAHAM

“For what does Scripture say about...?”

St. Paul’s highest court of appeal.

R O M A N S 4 : 1

The phrase “I trust you” is a statement of faith, because that is what the word *trust* means, that you are reliable enough for me to believe you can do me good. I trust your expertise and reliability, your character and good will towards me. This is one of the reasons the police and doctors and nurses and the military and some pastors wear uniforms, so you can trust them quickly without a long vetting process of gathering information and making judgments. And if they violate the symbol of trust– the uniform and its insignia– it’s a big deal because appearances did not square with expectations. When pastors and police are corrupt, everyone gets mad! “They took advantage of my trust.”

My observation is that some folk enter life with a bias towards trust and only withdraw it when another proves untrustworthy. Others take a more skeptical outlook and withhold trust till worth is demonstrated.¹ The first person is Pastor Phil, the second his wife Lori. She says I’m naive; I say she’s too cautious. It’s one of the issues we’ll never solve, one of the Yin and Yangs of marriage. I serve as her *director of new adventures*; she serves as my *early warning system*. Together we make up a fairly decent human being.

Now if you think of trust as a kind of currency, you can understand it as transactional. With money you buy stuff, and with self-revelation and trust you build relationships. When I trust you and you me, we accomplish a lot in a

¹ For a fascinating read on the various styles of faith, see Mark Mittleberg, *Your Faith Path: Discover How To Choose Your Beliefs* (Colorado Spring, CO: Tyndale, 2008).

hurry because of the synergy of cooperation. Trust opens our lives to one another. But when there's low trust on both sides, it's hard to do much of anything except fight— as in a broken marriage. And when it's high on one side and low on the other, it's just plain awkward with one person doing all the work. But if both trust accounts have a high balance, we can do business. You may trust someone because of the uniform and role, their expertise or reputation, or because of close observation— say in your family, but everyone exercises faith; everyone has trust; everyone relies on things they cannot prove in the strict laboratory sense. It's the basic currency of life, the question being, "Is the object of my trust worthy of my investment?"

One of the benefits of the digital revolution is that my car has become a rolling lecture hall. I can log into professors from anywhere around the world with a tap or two on my I-Phone. Lately I've been listening to several Christian apologists as they engage in public debates with atheists and Moslems and secularists, even one another. An apologist is one who makes a reasoned defense of the Christian faith; they argue it on the merits of the case against all comers. They're the church's intellectual elites, and since we've been debating the issues for two thousand years now, we've developed quite a brain trust, particularly the Roman Catholics with their training in philosophy.

In a world where most people share your ethics and outlook, if not your faith— as in much of American until just recently— you don't need many apologists because there are so few outright intellectual challenges.² But that old world is now crumbling.

I grew up in a cozy world which assumed the Christian faith and its practices, so there was little to argue about except denominational particulars. But when the culture shifts— as it did in the sixties and seventies, and when a new wave of skeptics arise and everything comes unglued and up for debate again— as in the last decade inside and outside the church, then the church has

² For a sobering read on a major culture shift with huge implications, see Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

to respond with its apologists, and we are now in *the golden age of apologetics*. Never have there been so many smart men and women writing books and making a rational public case for our faith, and one of the best is a portly professor of mathematics at Oxford University, Dr. John Lennox.³ So when a debate partner sets up a straw man like “You Christians have faith, while we secularists and scientists have proven knowledge,” Lennox smiles. He argues from simple observation that everyone has "faith" in something. He notes that the word *faith* isn't just a religious word. It's the Latin *fides*, meaning "trust" or "reliance," as in the words *fidelity* or *fiduciary*. He writes, "The irony is that atheism is a 'faith position,' and science itself cannot do without faith."

Lennox backs up his case by quoting Einstein who said, "I cannot imagine a scientist without that profound faith [that the universe is comprehensible to our reason]." The contemporary atheist Richard Dawkins writes, "An atheist ... is someone who *believes* there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no supernatural creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe ..." Notice that the atheist *believes* there is nothing beyond the natural world because he or she can't actually prove it. Physicist Paul Davies, who's not a Christian, says, "Even the most atheistic scientist accepts as an act of faith the existence of law-like order in nature that is at least in part comprehensible to us."⁴

So the question is not whether or not you have faith or trust in something you can't prove; everyone does. The proper question is the nature of that faith and is it well grounded? At the most basic level, we're all trusting in something, and some of us in Someone. Your life is resting somewhere. Do you know where? For followers of Jesus, all our lesser trusts are being reorganized around

³ His website is www.johnlennox.org.

⁴ An opinion piece published in the *New York Times* generated controversy over its exploration of the role of faith in scientific inquiry. Davies argued that the faith scientists have in the immutability of physical laws has its origins in Christian theology, and that the claim that science is "free of faith" is "manifestly bogus" ("Taking Science on Faith," *The New York Times*, 11-24-2007). The quotes are adapted from John Lennox, *Gunning for God* (London, England: Lion UK, 2011), 37-48.

a central trust in a particular God for whom we claim there's convincing evidence if you take time to explore it.⁵ Faith is evidence based trust that requires personal risk and commitment. Not blind risk, but a risk nonetheless, the risk of a new relationship which— because its object is the God of Jews and Jesus— is comprehensive with nothing of who you are omitted, and in that sense consuming. If entered, it must be central.

The question God asks remains, “Will you trust me?” And if the answer is “No,” or “Not yet,” the followup is, “Why not?” Some reply— oddly I might add since they're already speaking to God— “There's not enough evidence,” while others admit, “I'm mad at God.” Others are as frank, “I don't want to change that much,” or, “I'm afraid you'll ruin my life,” or, “No one in my family has ever done this,” or, “I don't want to be weird” or, “There are some habits and entertainments I don't want to get rid of,” or perhaps, “My current ideologies mean too much to me.”

This dialog takes place within head and heart, and it's intense. You've all had and continue to have this conversation in one form or another. I do. God comes near, offers light and grace, arranges evidences. God grants curiosity— what I call the big *What if?* and at some point speaks in customized ways to get your attention. What God does not do is coerce. Grace is not irresistible but may be resisted, and is. Your freedom is not breached and your No protected, but it is not without consequence because you're not the same afterwards.

To say to this God, if there is indeed such a one, “I do not trust you,” does not change God; it changes you. An offer is made and refused, a new life foreclosed, at least for the present. The trust God urged you to place in him is

⁵ A place to start is Mark Mittleberg, *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask* (Colorado Spring, CO: Tyndale, 2010) or Rice Brooks, *God's Not Dead: Evidence for God in an Age of Uncertainty* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2013). More advanced texts are William Lane Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision* (Colorado Spring, CO: David C. Cook, 2010) and Alister E. McGrath, *Mere Apologetics: How To Help Seekers & Skeptics Find Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012). An intriguing new book is Michael Rota, *Taking Pascal's Wager* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2016).

now placed elsewhere because the weight of your life will rest somewhere, and if not in God, there are lots of other options, and all of them misshape you in certain ways. And so God patiently waits and plans for another opening to make his case afresh. This God is tough and tender, patient and persistent, but time runs out at your last breath when destiny is fixed, as the Book of Hebrews makes clear, “And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment.”⁶

I often find that people who come to Christ later in life can look back and recall in great detail the approaches of God they resisted. And when I ask why, the answer typically has do with something they knew was wrong but didn’t want to give up. Something as serious as living with someone when unmarried, something as silly as loving to sleep in on Sundays. Fun and freedom, individually defined, is often the culprit.

I once sat across the room from a man who was killing himself with alcohol and who admitted, “God once called me to the ministry, and I said No.”

My answer? “The call still stands, though the form will change since you are now in the last quarter of life and greatly debilitated by your worship of the unholy Kentucky Trinity— Jim Beam, George Dickel, and Evan Williams. You will take a last drink one day. Life will end. Why not say Yes to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Why not trust? Why not be changed?”

There was no answer, just the blank stare of pride and long entrenched rebellion. If cremated, he might just burn for three days, a single blue alcohol flame from a soggy wick! My best guess is it would be just too embarrassing and too much trouble to consider such a great change of loyalties so late in life. So let’s not minimize how difficult some Yesses are, even if we all agree it’s a good idea. But it remains a possibility, however remote, and that is what the thief on the cross thought as well, “Best avail myself of my last next chance.”⁷

In his novel *The Testament*, John Grisham paints the agony of one man's

⁶ 9:27.

⁷ Luke 23:42-43.

surrender. Nate O'Reilly is a disgraced corporate attorney plagued by alcohol and drugs. After two marriages, four detoxes, and a serious bout with dengue, Nate acknowledges his need. Grisham describes the turning point:

“With both hands, he clenched the back of the pew in front of him. He repeated the list, mumbling softly every weakness and flaw and affliction and evil that plagued him. He confessed them all. In one long glorious acknowledgment of failure, he laid himself bare before God. He held nothing back. He unloaded enough burdens to crush any three men, and when he finally finished Nate had tears in his eyes. ‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered to God. ‘Please, help me.’

As quickly as the fever had left his body, he felt the baggage leave his soul. With one gentle brush of the hand, his slate had been wiped clean. He breathed a massive sigh of relief, but his pulse was racing.”⁸

It was an act of desperate trust, and Nate had nothing to commend himself, only his ugly history and raw need. Grisham gets it right; something happened, something Nate received as a gift but did not cause, the only sufficient cause being the goodness of the Giver. Jesus is, after all, *the friend of sinners*.

“Will you trust me?” is God’s question. “Am I worthy of your trust, and after that your love and obedience?” Adam and Eve— listening to a lying snake who questioned God’s intent— said by their actions and collusion:

“No. We like his offer better: more knowledge, more freedom. We think you’re holding out on us, keeping us as dependent as children. We want to grow up and make our own choices.”

And they did. It was a costly decision with unforeseen consequences, just like ours. So what’s the Creator to do when the gift of freedom is abused by every new generation?

⁸ (New York, NY: Random House, 1999), 374.

Romans 4:1-12. 10

Well, according to chapters four through eleven of Genesis, God continues to sustain the creation project, only now in the tough neighborhood outside Eden. It's sweat and blood, tears and babies and death, generation after generation.⁹ God monitors the growing violence and chaos, washes the world with a great flood to get rid of the truly bad folk, and starts over again with righteous Noah who gets off the ark, surveys the landscape, plants a vineyard, makes wine, gets drunk, exposes himself, and curses his children. Drunk and naked at the first party off the boat!¹⁰ Not a good restart. Not a good video of President Noah or Pastor Noah or even Poppa Noah. Apparently he's not as righteous as folk thought; apparently this thing of sin and evil cannot be cured by getting rid of certain people in mass executions. Everyone, including the best man of his day— Noah— is thoroughly infected with the same disease, and God is not about to get rid of us all, because then who'd carry out the great project?

So the uneven project of filling creation with image bearers continues until they decide to build a great city and a high tower in order to concentrate the people and make a statement about their divine aspirations. *A tower that reaches the heavens* is their goal, the use of religion and its architecture to make ourselves the center of our own world. The tower of Babel.

But here, and in response to this new form of sin, God enacts a highly creative judgment. Not death by long rains and mass drownings but confusion through multiple languages, because if they can't communicate they can't cooperate in prideful, idolatrous projects to make a name for themselves. God imposes a limit on what his lost and wandering children can accomplish, and it's for their good. They again scatter across the globe because God wants his image bearers— even broken and rebellious ones, to be everywhere living and suffering and learning and seeking and dying till he can get the news out.

Did you notice? No one dies at the tower of Babel.¹¹ It's a big

⁹ Genesis 5:1-32.

¹⁰ Genesis 6:1-9:19.

¹¹ Genesis 11:1-9.

improvement over mass deluges, and yet we're left with questions. Where will God gain leverage? Who will trust him and stay in the relationship long enough to be changed? Enoch did long ago, but he was only one bright spot.¹² So hundred of years pass before us in the next long Genesis genealogy.¹³ The generations of Noah's oldest son Shem are chronicled till we get down to one Terah, father of Abram— later renamed Abraham, who married Sarai— later renamed Sarah, but after years and years of hope they had no children; both are now too old. Their branch of the Shem family tree will bear no fruit. Was it punishment? Had they offended whatever gods there were who ruled over their city of Ur in ancient Chaldea?

We don't know if the Lord spoke to Terah before he spoke to Abram, but the way the story is told makes me wonder. What we have is a record that Terah planned to move his clan in a great migration to the land of Canaan- the same land to which Abram would be directed after this father's death, but that he did not make it. Instead, he and his settled in Haran three hundred miles to the north. He died here, his pilgrimage unfinished.¹⁴ Stage one was to get out of Assyria; stage two was to get to Canaan.

It was then that God made a bold move. He broke through the silence of the wandering generations and made his voice and command available to a seventy-five year old childless polytheist— because that was the religion of his culture, a man Paul later labeled as *ungodly*— sometimes translated as *wicked*— surely not a compliment for his greatest ancestor, but that makes the call of Abram all the greater.¹⁵ It was pure grace, an unmerited God-choice.

The One who spoke was a God Abram did not know or follow. Probably

¹² Genesis 5:21-24.

¹³ Genesis 11:10-26

¹⁴ Genesis 11:31-32.

¹⁵ On *ungodly*/ Gk. *asebas*, see Arland Hultgren, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 181.

thought of him— at least at the beginning— not as the one and only God but the local deity who controlled the turf around the city of Haran. Abraham wasn't pre-qualified. He wasn't chosen for his resume or sterling character or great theology. As with most national heroes, his legend grew over time as the bad stuff is minimized and the good burnished, just as we've done with Washington and Franklin and Jefferson. So for Paul to label him *ungodly* was highly offensive to fellow Jews who preferred an air-brushed Abraham to the historical Abram who was little different from any other rich herder and clan leader of his culture.¹⁶ We get angry when historians uncover sleazy stories about the Founding Fathers as if they are besmirching the nation. They are not; they are restoring an accurate picture of just who the men were, warts and all. When found and spoken to, Abraham was among *the ungodly, the wicked*.

And here is the turning point, the moment God decided to create within the larger human family a particular tribe of his own, a chosen people to bear his name and light to the world, which is why to this day all Jews speak of him as *Avinu Abraham*, "father Abraham," just as Paul did in his opening question, "What then shall we say about Abraham, *our forefather* according to the faith?" The beginning of the people who became the Jews is an old pagan from Sumeria. And here is the compressed report:

"Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 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. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.'

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran."¹⁷

¹⁶ For a helpful chart on the growth of Abraham's sterling reputation as an early monotheist and keeper of the whole Mosaic law in later rabbinic tradition, see Michael Bird, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2016), 143.

¹⁷ Genesis 12:1-4.

Romans 4:1-12. 13

A strange voice says, “Leave everything you know for the unknown, and along the way amazing things will happen. Signed, the LORD.” And he did. Apparently, the voice or the voice plus vision was convincing. But he’s still carrying all his religious and cultural baggage. And along the way, sometimes followed by long silences, the Lord reveals himself at turning points.

At Shechem a vision is given, and with it a fresh promise of the land.¹⁸ Abe’s response is to built an altar of stones and offer animal sacrifice. He worships according to custom. First he heard and obeys; here he sees and hears and worships. But then, in the very next story, he pawns wife his wife off to Pharaoh in Egypt as his sister in order to save himself.¹⁹ Not yet a good man, and to our relief, the Lord protects her honor when her husband won’t.

He then goes off to war to protect Lot, gives tithes to the priest of Salem, and receives another vision, this time with a promise that he and Sarai will have a son. After a brief misunderstanding in which the Lord says it will be a real baby and not just an adopted slave already in Abram’s household, God brings him outside the tent to look at the vast, dark, middle-Eastern heavens and says, “So shall your descendants be,” then this amazing comment, Genesis 15:6, “And he *believed the Lord*; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Abraham trusted; he did not refuse the gift of faith.

It was a long walk of trust, but here it came to a turning point according to Paul’s later reading. God’s consistent and amazing promises drew from Abram a trust, a belief, a confidence in the promise keeper and the life giver, after which God marked a change in status, “We are now in a right relationship in which I make promises and you trust me as they unfold.”

Abe and the Lord are now senior and junior partners, *in cahoots* with one another. Complete trust on God’s side, growing trust and understanding on

¹⁸ Genesis 12:4-9.

¹⁹ Genesis 12:10-20.

Abraham’s. Only twenty nine years later is the mark of circumcision required,²⁰ and it is over four hundred years later that the law is given to Moses.²¹ Abraham walked with his new God long before he was sealed with a scar and long before the details of the law were unveiled. He was right with God, not by external signs or Jewish law but by radical, vulnerable, open-ended, risky, evidence-based trust, and it was God’s election, God’s choice, and God’s enablement that made his response possible. So God said, “That’s enough, dear friend; you trust me, and that’s all I need to use you for things greater than you can imagine.” No Bible as yet, no long tradition as yet, no community except the clan he had to lead and convince, just the Lord and Abraham building a long, slow, relationship of trust and worship and even some tests of costly obedience.²² You can read the entire story in Genesis chapters 12 through 25.

And, to think, from this has come the revelation of the Living God, the Jews and their Exodus, the prophets and the Scriptures, Mary and Jesus and the New Testament and the apostolic faith and the long march of the church through time. And still the question is the same. God asks, “Will you trust me? Will you risk a relationship with your Maker? To o those who answer Yes, God says, “I reckon that we are now in a right, restored relationship. Iniquities forgiven, sins covered, debts cleared, open to one another in trust.”

And so from Abraham come two options, the Jews as God’s marked and regulated people who must also trust, and the rest of the world– us Gentiles, who start just where he started, with nothing but trust. So, in Paul’s mind, Abraham– odd as it is to say, was both the first Jew and the first Gentile Christian!

CONCLUSION

There’s a lot on offer in the world’s religious market place, a bazaar full of

²⁰ Genesis 17:10-24.

²¹ Galatians 3:17

²² See the story of he sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22.

options then and now, lots of ways to make sense of the big questions. And the only one who can claim that all religions teach the same thing is the one who's never studied them in depth, because all make exclusive claims that are incompatible with one another.²³ So it's really not *blend your own* but *make a choice*. I like the pithy summary of Dane Ortlund:

“The ancient Greeks told us to be moderate by knowing our inclinations. The Romans told us to be strong by ordering our lives. Buddhism tells us to be dis-illusioned by annihilating our consciousness. Hinduism tells us to be absorbed by merging our souls. Islam tells us to be submissive by subjecting our wills. Agnosticism tells us to be at peace by ignoring our doubts. Moralism tells us to be good by discharging our obligations. Only the gospel (of Jesus and his church) tells us to be free by acknowledging our failure. Christianity is *the unreligion* because it is the one faith whose founder tells us to bring not our doing, but our need.”²⁴

The doctor says you have a severe infection. There is such a thing as penicillin, and if you trust your physician, you'll take it. Otherwise it cannot kill the bacteria that's killing you. You have a sin and evil problem. You will die. There is a cure if you trust God to apply what's needed, and the name of the medicine is Jesus Christ the life giver.

Do you trust this God? If not, why not?
Are you doing life together with this God like Abraham our father?
How's it going? Where could you use some encouragement?

²³ For an introduction, see Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run The World* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2010). Also Ed Stetzer, "Proselytizing in a Multi-Faith World: Why mutual respect and tolerance require us to witness for Christ," *Christianity Today* (April, 2011).

²⁴ *Defiant Grace: The Surprising Message and Mission of Jesus* (Welwyn Garden City, England: EP Books, 2011), 38, ital. ad.
