

For the serious Christian, it's hard to find a more powerful reality in the Old Testament than the story of Abraham! Sure, there's Adam and Eve and Noah and Moses and Joshua and Rahab and David and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Daniel and Esther. But there's a special place for Abraham, there was a special role for Abraham. And there are lessons for a life in God that Abraham uniquely exemplifies.

From life-changing responses by faith...to a highly cultivated habit of patience...to the physical protection of his nephew...to the unique sensitivity of honoring the true King and Priest...to clearly hearing the voice of the Lord...to unquestioningly obeying that voice...to not living by sight but by faith...to a very unique a-“ha” moment...to dogged covenant-bearing...to responding to a foundation for generations to follow...to masterfully navigating the duality of stars and sand, heavens and earth. Well now, Abraham occupies an utterly unique time and place in the totality of God's economy throughout history. And we're going to be talking about all that, and what it means to us these thousands of years later, in this series about Abraham.

And we must start in exactly the right context—and that's the preparatory time for Abraham. As is the case in the lives of so many of God's people, there was a preparatory time that was essential to the important stories involving Abraham that followed. And that's the purpose of this initial episode—what we call “the preparatory years,” that crucial time in the life of Abraham before the recorded Bible narrative. Early on, Abraham was known as Abram...until God changed his name. We'll use both names.

The problem right off the bat, of course, is that the Bible tells us very little about Abraham's first 75 years—those preparatory years. But, if you allow, let's construct a narrative of Abram—who later became “Abraham,” a story in itself—that helps us understand the prep years of the Abram who did so much right in the eyes of the Lord!

Let's face it: we as modern Jesus-followers from, say, Europe, North America, or East Asia, are astonishingly tech-enabled to connect instantly with countless people...and are typically way over-informed by both good and bad data...and can get to pretty much any city on the planet in 24 hours. Wow!

Contrast that with Abram from Ur. There is some dispute about whether Abram's Ur was located in what is now the desert of southern Iraq or was much further north in Iraq or even in southern Turkey. All that doesn't matter to us today. For Abram, there was absolutely no digital or mechanical presence. No cars, no refrigeration, no electric lights, no cell phones, no laptops, no tablets, no commonly-accessible physical transmission of information like library books. By modern standards, Abraham had almost nothing, like us going deep into the desert of Arizona for decades with just a tent and a camel and a water gourd, indeed, like totally going on a permanent fast without conveniences, technology, or new innovation!

So, in Abram's time and place, just what in the world do you do, day in and day out? Well, you certainly talk with your clan and with your neighbors—that same old talk every day, with very few distractions, except a few weather changes and aggressive warlords trying to take over your land and possessions.

So, if you were Abram, you would surely talk about the legends of the past from your immediate family—good or bad—and, of course, the rest of everybody else, who, in that era, were pretty much a whole lot of uncles and aunts and cousins, distant or not. Of course, certain juicy stories are told over and over. And that constant verbal history was super-instructive for a man like Abram—becoming ingrained, cementing his understanding of the world...and his understanding of God...and his understanding of humanity.

Let's take a look at Abram's early view from Ur, recapping pretty much by name and reputation.

Adam and Eve. Of course, we have to start right there in the Garden of Eden. Certainly Abram was no modern thinker believing people are always good, so he didn't need to look further than his ancestors and ours—Adam and Eve! Romans 3:23 says that we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. So we are not confused...and neither was Abram. Sin was the stain that was invited in and stayed.

Cain and Abel, with the life of Abel abbreviated by murder by the hand of Cain. Well, we're certainly not talking about family reunions with hot dogs, watermelon and ice cream. No, the myth that the Bible is all about Bible families being pictures of steadfast support and love—well, that got blasted to smithereens with the first family of humanity. And that's carried forward to this day due to that old sin problem.

From Adam to Noah, with a huge asterisk for Enoch. Abram surely heard a roll call that he surely knew by heart...from Adam to Seth to Enosh to great-grandson Jared to Enoch to Methuselah to grandson Noah. Hey, you know about Methuselah from Vacation Bible School or the like...we remember that he was the guy who lived the longest of any man, ever. But wait a minute! That's not true! Methuselah's dad, Enoch apparently never died. Genesis 5:23-24 says, "Thus all the days of Enoch were 365 years. Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him."

Amazing. *Enoch walked with God. Then Enoch was not, for God took him.* What a surprising oral history for Abram to ponder, to dwell upon during those long desert nights! The first chapters of Genesis ascribe these words, "walked with God" solely to Enoch...and then Enoch was taken. Abram could forget sin for a moment, forget Cain, forget that family tree where everybody had died...*because of Enoch!* God took Enoch. Abram was surely paying attention about Enoch walking with God, because Enoch was *uniquely* exceptional! Yes, Abram knew something extraordinary had happened with Enoch...by God's hand!

Man's corruption. Humanity began to multiply. And "the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Genesis 6:5) And the Lord decided to blot out the humanity whom He created. Did Abram know this? Of course—God's method was the Flood. And that flood's a very strong, lasting impression about God...and about humanity.

Noah set apart, then God's covenant with Noah. "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord!" Noah was righteous. Noah heard the voice of the Lord. And Noah was obedient to the Lord in what he heard—the Bible says, twice, that, *Noah did all that God commanded him*. The Flood came, and the only human survivors were Noah and his family—eight of 'em. Then, land ho! Noah built an altar and God covenanted with Noah and blessed Noah. And Abram heard this story about his not-so-distant relative, in his tent in the heat of the desert day...day after day in the desert, absent the rain that had once deluged the earth.

The Tower of Babel. Then humanity gathered and started building a city and a tower, greatly displeasing God, who dispersed them all around the earth. The mass of humanity was not listening to God's voice.

And there we have God's history of humanity, the history of Abram's family. Yes, the clusters of humanity who largely disobeyed God and suffered His wrath. But that was interspersed with Enoch and Noah, ones who walked with God, listened to God, obeyed God. So here was Abram, with no TV, no internet, no false narratives...just 75 years of Abram hearing, listening, learning about very different choices: Cain, widespread corruption, and Babel on the one hand—then Enoch and Noah, listening and obeying, on the other. Yes, obedience vulnerable to ridicule, like the huge Noah's Ark, constructed with no rain in sight.

We know the stories related to Abram invariably ended with one of the same two general destinations: widespread destruction, or a soul or two being lifted up by the God near and listened to. That was 75 years of Abram's graduate school, always learned from true history, learned from the stories of the great practitioners of following God—Enoch and Noah—always accompanied by the hard lessons for the rest of humanity. Those were Abram's prep years, cemented. Then. Then, after 75 years, Abram hit the "now."

Genesis 12:1 says, "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.'" Abram heard. Abram listened. Abram obeyed. So, those prep years were crucial, prepping Abram for the trials and choices to follow. That's just like the Christian life. Don't despair your prep years. Cultivate the voice of God. *Our* privilege? Like Abram: to listen, learn, obey.

