

## Jesus &amp; Abraham

Okay, back to the “flossing sermons.” Today we are talking about Jesus and Abraham. How many people do you know who still discount or ignore the Old Testament? Hopefully you don’t know *any*, but I know quite a few. What is the issue under the surface? Most of the real issues lie under the surface. When was the last time you had an argument with a friend, or your spouse? What did you fight about? It is almost invariably a detail up on the surface of life that merely represents real issues underneath. We aren’t really threatened, unloved, rejected, or mistrusted because of caps on toothpaste, dinner being late, or one possibly inappropriate bill. But who ever fights wars over the real issues? And who can win a war if it isn’t fought over the real issues in the first place?

Anyway, the real theological issue behind connecting Old and New Testaments is the nature of Jesus. Is Jesus really a man? Is the Incarnation real and true? We know Jesus ended up being more than a man – more than a flesh-and-blood human, as we usually think of such. Jesus is more than a man, and He keeps telling us that we are more than human too. We are the beloved children of the Omnipotent God. But Jesus is also a human being! If you make Jesus purely divine without being also human, then you do not need the Old Testament. History, family of origin, parents, societal or national origin – all the things we know that go into shaping and forming us – don’t matter if Jesus is divine: dropped out of Heaven fully formed and sent to save us. And in this scenario, even the “saving” has little to do with us identifying with Jesus, or with Jesus identifying with us. We are mere recipients of God’s action to save us, and are not participants in any way. Our choices and responses are neither needed nor required.

But if Jesus is also human, then the Old Testament is essential to the story. There is no way to understand Jesus or what He is doing – what He is about, where He came from, or what He is trying to accomplish – if we do not pay attention to the things that we know shape and form all human life. Apart from the Jewish people – the Old Testament and its heroes and beliefs; its struggles and hopes; its failures and high points – there is no way to understand how Jesus understood Himself, what His values were, or what He thought was important. Nothing authentic in real life drops out of nowhere. The most startling moments of inspiration or revelation still have context. And without their context, we couldn’t

understand anything about them. God is always waiting for events to swirl around us in such a way that when God speaks or acts, we will have enough association to catch a glimmer of what is going on – and retain it, remember it – and become part of it.

Can we understand Jesus apart from Abraham? I don't think we can. And I think it is ludicrous to try. Did Jesus revere Abraham and think he had gone to Heaven? Clearly and obviously He did. (Luke 13:28; 16:22) Did Jesus think some of His countrymen were too proud of having descended from Abraham? Yes again. Is it really possible to think that Abraham had no influence on Jesus, even though Abraham lived as far before Jesus as we live after Jesus? Perhaps we should let the New Testament answer for us. Is Abraham ever mentioned in the New Testament? Many times, but only in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, Second Corinthians, Galatians, Hebrews, James, and First Peter. I claim that is reason enough for us to continue this sermon.

Abraham is the first Jew. His name means “father”: Father of Faith; Father of Judaism; Father of fathers. If we spoke Hebrew, it would be unmistakable: In Hebrew, Abram (*avram*) means “exalted father.” How do you get bigger than that? The only way I can think of is to increase the territory. *Avraham* means “father of multitudes” – father of nations. Though a few prophets and teachers warned against assuming it carelessly or claiming it as a protection despite faithless living, it has long been assumed that being “children of Abraham” was assurance of being “God's Chosen People” – heirs of The Promise, guaranteed a place in Heaven. Certainly this was the widespread belief in Jesus' day.

You may remember Jesus' story about the rich man and Lazarus. (Luke 16:20) We have no time for that story today, except to note that Jesus pictures Abraham as the one who welcomes and comforts people in Heaven. Not St. Peter – Abraham. Of course, this is only according to Jesus – a thing, maybe, more Christians ought to ponder.

We have been working from the premise, in these flossing sermons, that Jesus was not only Jewish and a product of Judaism, but that He had pondered and prayed and studied His heritage until He saw dimensions to it which no others had, and that He felt its purpose and passion beyond what any others had.

So what is Jesus' view of Abraham? It is one of great honor and respect, as should not surprise us. It is also clear that Jesus sees Abraham as founder and headwaters of something far beyond Judaism. God's plans and purposes are always bigger than ours. Perhaps Jesus has taken His lead from Isaiah. In any case, it is clear. In Matthew 8:10-12, Jesus has just healed a Roman centurion's servant. A Roman centurion is, of course, an outsider, a gringo, a pagan. Jesus is surprised and delighted by the centurion's faith. *"When Jesus heard him, he marveled, and said to those who followed him, 'Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.'"* Scandalous! Jesus is picturing hordes of people from all over the world, and from far beyond Judaism, sitting at table (table fellowship means total inclusion and acceptance) with Abraham – with the Fathers. Abraham is Father and host to a far wider circle than is usually imagined. I mean, we might as well try to suggest that there will be people beyond the Christian definitions – people we do not think of as baptized or converted – who will be "sitting at table" in Heaven with Peter and Paul, with Abraham, with Elijah, and with a vast host of others. Remember John 10:16? *"Other sheep I have, not of this fold."*

Point number one: Jesus reveres and honors Abraham, and in no way reduces his importance. Just the opposite. Jesus greatly increases Abraham's importance. That is, Jesus sees Abraham as God's way of starting something which will become far bigger than one religion in the world, no matter how important that is. And even at this moment in time, three world religions claim Abraham as source and Father. The world keeps making definitions and limits and squeezing things down to manageable proportions. So God keeps breaking it open again. He does it with Jesus, with the prophets before Him, and with the apostles after Him. The followers of Jesus also keep defining it and squeezing it down – until the Holy Spirit of Jesus has to blow open the borders again: with Cornelius, with Paul, with a Reformation and then a Counter-Reformation, with Pope John the 23rd, and, I hope, with us.

By the way, the Apostle Paul took his lead from Jesus (something he did a lot more often than some people want to acknowledge), so Paul also saw Abraham as the forerunner of the Christian Faith – that is, as the one who first based everything on faith, and gave us authority for

putting grace and Gospel ahead of circumcision and Law. Paul writes: “*Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’ ... that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.*” (Galatians 3:6-14; Romans 4:2-13) Well, that is too short and fast, perhaps. But when I hear things like that, all the borders break loose and all the bells in the world start chiming. Only, it wasn’t starting with Jesus, was it? It was starting with Abraham, two thousand years earlier. And even that is only when *we* start to notice.

So what is Abraham’s legacy to Jesus, and to all of us as well? More of a subject for a book than a sermon, but just for openers:

- We have a covenant with God. At least we do if we are willing to enter it and live by it.
- God cares about us, both individually and collectively. There is a destiny and purpose for us.
- If we are willing, we can hear and obey the “inner voice” by which God speaks to us.
- All this depends on our decision to worship (respect, love, obey) God alone.

Herein is a great, wondrous, and fascinating dilemma. Idolatry is anathema. But who is this God whom alone we give our allegiance to – whom alone we worship? Abraham had no name or definition for it. Abraham had encountered, and ended up paying attention to, “a presence” – a presence that started whispering instructions in his inner ears. We try to name God after we meet – after an encounter. But this God is not known by name; that comes later. This God is known by a presence that we become aware of. It is not an objective reality; it is a subjective reality – always unprovable. To stay loyal to this presence known from within, yet ever separate and different from us, is the core of our religion. This was so for Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and down through all the annals of our religious heritage.

Jesus said that the “sin against the Holy Spirit” is the only unforgiveable sin. To know the presence of God within and to pay no attention means God cannot help us because we will not listen. This is not “unforgiveable” because God is angry. Nor is the “unforgiveableness” necessarily permanent. We can change our minds and start paying attention at any time. But until that time, God cannot help us if we will not pay attention – if we will not listen or respond.

This legacy is huge. But before we close, let us turn to one other enormous contribution that Abraham made to the religious life of Judaism: He stopped child sacrifice. Or rather, God stopped it through Abraham.

The year was somewhere around 2000 B.C. Judaism had not been invented yet. God had it designed, but humans hadn’t caught on yet. Abraham was the first likely-looking prospect God had found to bring the design into reality. So God had been putting a lot of extra time and attention into him. Abraham was the beginning of Judaism, of Covenant Promise, of obeying God in a personal way. But this would not be true if his beginning did not remind all of us of our own “beginnings”: God starts spending time and attention on us too. We feel ourselves being invited into some “new country” – into living a different WAY, for different reasons. God’s presence always increases awareness. Life is bigger than we thought, and more important than we thought.

At first, out on the surface of Abraham’s life, all that could be seen by others was erratic behavior. Abraham was impetuous. He took sudden long journeys. He piled rocks into heaps in odd places. He had this “Freudian thing” about cutting the foreskin off the male members of his clan. He spent long hours brooding in silence. Some people wondered if maybe he had flipped just a little. But wherever he went, he seemed to prosper. The people under him didn’t mind a *little* aberration, as long as the food was abundant and the protection seemed good.

On the inside, Abraham was wrestling with this strange inner “presence” – a kind of “voice”: Pack up everything you own and go live in the land beyond the great desert – Canaan. Now go to Egypt. Now go back to Canaan. Keep out of Sodom and Gomorrah. Build a big heap of stones here in my honor. Circumcise all the male members of your tribe. Keep doing all that I command you, and I will make a great nation of you and your offspring.

Abraham knew that something strange and important was going on. He didn't always understand what, and he never knew how. But somehow God had started something with him. There was a covenant between them. There was to be a new nation and a new religion. It all hinged upon a promised son.

When Isaac finally arrived, unusually late in life, Abraham knew the covenant had been sealed. It had been harder and harder to keep believing the promise, as years had gone by and he had grown older and older. But now it was clear again that all the strange directives had been for real. It was going to happen as promised. And then Abraham's real turmoil began.

All around him, for all of his life, Abraham had lived in the midst of cultures and religions that believed in child sacrifice. He had grown up in Ur (not far from Babylon) and in a religion that believed that the first-born son belonged to the gods. The gods were not to be taken lightly. Improper or insufficient sacrifice meant wrath and disaster. Abraham began to wonder what requirements would be made by the God who had been dealing with him. The thought scared him beyond utterance. God was worthy of our highest gift, and he had a right to any gift that he might ask for. The highest gift was the firstborn son. Devoting the first-born son was a sign of allegiance and was acknowledgment of God's sovereignty. And so Abraham couldn't think straight anymore. Doubtless he tried to put it out of his head, put it off, not think about it; Isaac was already older than he should have been. And doubtless Abraham had as much luck not thinking about it as you or I have with some of the fears that we can neither face nor leave alone.

So God put Abraham to the test. That is the way the story reads. (And we hear it, remember, from Abraham's perspective, not from God's.) I suspect that God decided it was time to bring the issue to a head before Abraham's fear clouded everything and ruined the plan. Nevertheless, Abraham concluded that Isaac must be sacrificed. Other religions and other worshippers were willing to make such high sacrifices. Should his faith and devotion be any less? Should he love God any less? Who comes first, God or the children? If we get that wrong, we don't have a God; we have merely turned our children into idols. Abraham knew that he owed God everything. He had obeyed him for too many years to change now. Isaac must be sacrificed. It was a conundrum – a dilemma of the worst kind. God's promises depended on Isaac, but Isaac must be

sacrificed. If we do not obey God, nothing else matters anyway. So Abraham was damned either way. And since he was damned either way, Abraham would do what he believed God wanted. What happened after that was up to God.

So Abraham went into the wilderness, as the story says, and literally put his son's life into the hands of God. Please note: God went along with it until there was no more doubt in Abraham's mind about his own obedience. That was the only way Abraham would ever get free of his doubt and fear. For his own sake, and for the sake of all Judaism forever after, Abraham had to know that his willingness to obey God was unconditional. Only after Abraham had reached that point could God's true purpose come to light. If God had moved too soon, Abraham would never have known for sure whether he had really understood, or merely copped-out. God, perhaps, has that problem with some of us? Only, we won't go into the wilderness to find out whether our doubts are real or imagined. So we blame God forever for motives and expectations we have only imagined and then projected onto him.

In any case, Abraham was in for a wonderful surprise. Abraham put his son's life into the hands of God, and discovered that he had it all wrong. God did not want that kind of sacrifice. God wanted life and abundance, not death and sorrow. It was one of the first major breakthroughs into the mind and heart of God. On God's altar, Isaac was safe – safer than anywhere else in the world. And slowly but surely, God used that moment to rid the world of child sacrifice. Today the world's attitude toward child sacrifice is so reversed that some of you can hardly hear the story of Abraham and Isaac. But Abraham's world would have been shocked that God did *not* require the sacrifice – so shocked that at first they didn't believe that Abraham had gotten it right. (Well, children are still being sacrificed on other altars, and God is still working on that. But they are no longer being sacrificed on the altars that belong to God.)

So the story continued, and Judaism came into being. For two thousand years – whenever faith was strong enough to dare, and willingness was real – the people discovered that God was not like what people feared he was like. God was not the enemy. (Power does not always corrupt.) The Almighty was a puzzle. Nobody was absolutely sure, and few are even yet, but the possibility and the awareness were growing that the motives of the Almighty might be good – maybe even loving.

Deep into the same drama, but later in history, another Father took a similar kind of risk. On the surface it would seem like it should not have been a very great risk. Abraham, after all, had good reason to be alarmed; everyone in the world feared the power of the gods. Humans, on the other hand, are benevolent, courageous, kind, patient, forgiving, hard-working, and long only for progress and improvement. Humans have good motives. Ask any of them. They will tell you that they have only the best of intentions.

One group of humans, with only the highest of motives, had been dreaming, praying, asking, and waiting for a Leader of exceptional wisdom and ability to come and help them fulfill their own destiny and bring peace and progress to the whole world. They had waited and hoped and asked for such a Leader for years – for generations. “Please, oh please, send us the Messiah.” On the surface, it would seem like there could be little risk for God to send such a Leader. God is dangerous and unpredictable, while humans are safe and caring and have high motives. And besides, the whole nation had begged and prayed most fervently, promising total support if only this Leader would be sent to them.

So another Father took the risk, and put his Son into the hands of humans. Only, this time the sacrifice was not waived. In fear and mistrust, in pride and anger, humans killed the Son of God. The Leader of Peace and Love was utterly rejected. Nothing is safe on man’s altars. There is no place more dangerous in all the world.

Two altars, two sacrifices, two sons. Do you suppose that Jesus was oblivious to the parallel and contrast? Not hardly! He picked up the ancient theme and lived it through to completion – He filled in the other side of the story so we could see the truth, if we wanted to. Do you want to know where to expect love and mercy, and where to expect animosity and pain? Do you want to know who is for LIFE, and who brings death? Do you want to know where to be surprised by love, and where to be surprised by hatred? Check the two altars, the two sacrifices, the two sons. God is not the enemy. Humans are! And unless something overcomes our fear and alienation from God, WE will forever be our own worst enemy. *“And Cain rose up and killed his brother Abel.”* And he has done so again and again, from that day to this.

Jesus was the Son of God. Yet Jesus was also a child of Judaism, and of His heritage and everything it represented. He picked up the deep themes, absorbed them, carried them to new dimensions. And not just



piecemeal, here and there. Not just from Adam or Moses or Abraham, but from the entire history and tradition of His people. But we are only looking at Jesus and Abraham at the moment.

It was not enough, this business of God being magnanimous and not requiring the sacrifice. You would think, in a way, that it would have taught us a lot more about God than it did. But somehow it didn't take, or wouldn't stick. Neither did all the other times God tried to reveal mercy and love. Somehow, humanity was not involved deeply enough in the drama. It is a LIFE or DEATH issue, but seeing God as holy, aloof, and controlling everything from a distance makes it too easy for us to pretend we are not directly involved. We are spectators off on the side, amusing ourselves while God is somewhere in the main arena doing God's thing. We are just surviving, and waiting to hear news of the outcome of the big event: Did God win peace and love and joy for us, or is God still struggling with it? "Are we there yet, Daddy?" or do we have to go on suffering in our innocence for a little longer?

So God had to get more dramatic – had to show us that we are in the main event and part of the major drama all the way. He had become a handy excuse – the ONE to blame for all that happened. So one year, around the time when B.C. was turning into A.D., God said: "Okay, you are in it all the way – up to your eyeballs and to the core of your own soul. I put my Son in your hands. That is all the Leadership and all the love you could ever use or hope to find. No more excuses. It is up to you what you will do with your life. It is up to each one of you who you will follow, what you will worship, who or what you live for."

It did not seem to help at first. But it made the picture very clear: God is not the problem, and God is not the enemy. We are. And since that time, all the projections we have put onto God about wrath and vengeance and punishment have been breaking up. They cannot stand in the face of what happened on that Cross, and the forgiveness that came anyway.

So we have lost the fear-and-punishment picture by the continual experience of grace and love. Yet with that, we have gained the full weight of our frightening responsibility: Who is to blame? From the Cross onward – we are! Grace and mercy carry with them this price. We lose God's wrath and get invited into eternal life. But in return, we have to face our own evil, repent, and find redemption – or die. And if we don't like high and complicated theological constructs, all we have to do

is ask ourselves: In our experience of life so far, where has most of our pain, sorrow, rejection, and travail come from? Has it come from God, or from human beings? God's altar seems frightening to us, but we are really quite safe there. It is, in fact, the safest place on earth. But nothing is safe on man's altar – not the trees, not the animals, not the fish, not even the humans ... not even the Son of God.

One more thing, while we are on the subject: When God finally decides to do a thing, it stays done. We have all wondered at times, I suspect, what *we* would have done if we had been alive back in Palestine in the days of Jesus. How would we have reacted if we had been the ones into whose hands God had put the life of his Son? But strangely enough, that is one thing we do not need to wonder about. When God does something, it stays done. The life of the Son *is* put into our hands. That is, we each still have our chance to react and respond to Jesus in whatever way we choose, and as much in our time as Peter or Paul or anyone else did in their time.

A lot of people seem to have no conscious awareness of this. Yet it stays done anyway. Ignorance of The Law is no excuse, as we all know. Well, ignorance of The Love is no excuse either! It is done, and it stays done.

Not totally, not forever, but in this realm, here and now – because we are free to choose, because we are LOVED – we have God's life in our hands. As much as we will receive of God's Life is with us to do with what we will, each and every day. And together, we have even more of God's Life in our hands. What shall we do with the reversed sacrifice? We are seeing it all the time. And we will go on seeing it, because what we do with it becomes our heritage and our history – it becomes who and what we truly are.