

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Learning difficult lessons with Abraham: Learning from family difficulties

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*. The title of our talk this morning is "Learning from family difficulties". This is the third talk in the series called "Learning difficult lessons with Abraham". The story of Abraham's life begins in Genesis 11:31 and continues through to Genesis 25:10. Abraham's name is also mentioned and referred to many times throughout the Bible. Abraham is a well known character throughout the world today; in fact many nations hold Abraham as their forefather. The life of Abraham is a very interesting and a worthwhile study. I would encourage you to carefully take time to read through and study his life, and I am sure you will be helped and blessed for doing so.

Family difficulties are something that we will all face at some time or another during our lives whether we are Christians or not. When considering this talk, I initially thought: how can I make this subject relevant to all, and not just to those of us who have been privileged to have children? Well! When I studied Abraham I soon realised that we have all sorts of problems with different members of his family. There are fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, children, uncles, nephews, brothers, sisters and more, all mentioned in the life of Abraham. So our talk this morning relates to all who are listening.

Looking from the outside in, some of us seem to have more or fewer difficulties than others. Please note that I said "looking from the outside in". We must be very careful not to look at others and judge their family difficulties as we see them. We don't know the problems they have; we don't know all the details of their issues, so we are not at liberty to judge. Each one of us has enough to do before God with our own families. I am not saying that you cannot help others; many very good friends are a real blessing to other families. If you do desire to try and help, this must be done prayerfully and very, very carefully, with a loving and gracious heart, not taking any sides.

As a Christian parent myself, desiring that my children continue in the things of the Lord, I observed other families that I have known throughout the years, to see if I could learn from them. Maybe there is some sort of formula to guarantee them going on with the things of the Lord? But I have come to the conclusion that there is absolutely no guarantee our children will continue as we want them to. Abraham, as we will see later, had six sons to Keturah (Genesis 25:2), and it seems that only Zimran had any mark of spirituality. So just because Abraham was godly, this did not guarantee that his sons would be. Abraham was the only man in the Bible to be called "*the friend of God*" (James 2:23, 2 Chronicles 20:7). You and I would think that because Abraham was held in such high esteem by God that his sons would follow his godly walk. Another thing we must remember is that God loves all our sons and daughters; they are all His. We have been given the privilege and the responsibility by God to bring them up, to lead, direct and be a witness to them.

I am also anxious not just to major on difficulties. The title of the talk is "Learning from family difficulties". So it's how we react, how we learn from these times of difficulties or testing. Do we let ourselves feel down and depressed? Or do we wonder why God has allowed these problems in our lives? Do we trust in God in our time of need? Will our faith grow stronger like Abraham? As Christians we are not exempt from trials and difficulties in life. Annie Johnson Flint (1866-1932) was a remarkable Christian lady who had terrible trials in her life. She wrote many poems one of which I quote:

*"God hath not promised skies ever blue,
Flower strewn pathways all our lives through;
God hath not promised sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.*

*But God hath promised strength for the day,
Rest for the labour, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love."*

If you read what she went through, you will be amazed at the faith and confidence she had in God.

I would like to begin by reading and commenting on Genesis 22:1: *“And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said to him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.”* The words *“after these things”* jumped out of the page at me as I read them. God was about to test Abraham’s faith to an unimaginable degree by telling him to sacrifice his special son, Isaac, the one who was promised by God (Genesis 17:16). But God had prepared Abraham for this event that was to be a wonderful picture of what God was going to do with His Son at the cross of Calvary two thousand years later when the Lord Jesus would be offered up on the account of our sin and there would be no substitute then. The reason that he was prepared was because of all the circumstances he had had to deal with throughout his life. Abraham had learned from these experiences to trust God, and have his faith and confidence only in God, so he was ready for this special task. During our lives, we may never know what God has planned to use us for in the future. But what we do know is that God will have us prepared for the task.

As we pinpoint some of the circumstances and decisions in Abraham’s life, I do not want in any way to be critical of Abraham; he was a man with the same passions as us. I want you and me to realise that we, too, can make decisions like he made, tell white lies, be impatient, and fail during times of trouble. If a great man like Abraham is able to do these things, so can we. The main thing is that we have to learn to *“walk in the Spirit”* (Galatians 5:16). We must walk with God and try and understand His ways with us. We must desire to know Him better day by day.

In Genesis 11:31 we read of Abraham’s father, Terah, who was taking his family into Canaan but stayed in Haran wasting many years. He died in Haran and never reached Canaan (Genesis 11:32). After his father had died, God commanded Abraham to take his family from Haran to the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:1-5). This was to be a bold move for Abraham and his family. He took Sarah his wife, Lot his brother Nahor’s son, and all the servants from Haran and went into the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:5). Abraham pitched his tent and built an altar which were two things he was marked by. Abraham gave thanks to God for the promised land He had given him and his seed. The move into Canaan seemed to go well. Abraham was a good business man his flocks and herds were increasing.

But in Genesis 12:10 we read that there was a terrible famine in Canaan. What would Abraham do? How would he feed his family, his herds, and his flocks? We don’t read that Abraham brought his problems before God. Abraham took things into his own hands. He decided to go down to Egypt (Genesis 12:10). Yes, “down” to Egypt! In the Bible Egypt always speaks of the world, Abraham took his family away from the promised land and God’s blessings. Abraham’s wife, Sarah, was a very good looking woman and he thought that the Egyptians would kill him so they could take her. So he tells Sarah to tell a white lie, that she was his sister (Genesis 12:11-13). It worked; Abraham was treated very well by the Egyptians (Genesis 12:14-15). But soon he was found out because God had sent plagues into Pharaoh’s house (Genesis 12:1-17). Pharaoh confronted Abraham and commanded him to leave Egypt immediately (Genesis 12:18-20). When we step out of line with God because of difficult circumstances, it affects our decisions, our families, and others.

Abraham, after his embarrassment with Pharaoh, left Egypt with his family and all his possessions. Abraham again gets himself right spiritually and he calls on the name of the LORD. Problems began to emerge as Abraham and Lot’s herdsman began to argue with each other (Genesis 13:7). Lot had followed Abraham into Egypt; he had seen everything that had gone on there. I wonder what he thought of Uncle Abraham’s actions? Lot seems to be a follower rather than a leader, so Abraham was not a good example to him in Egypt. Abraham did not want any bad feeling between his men and Lot’s, so he suggested that they go their own ways (Genesis 13:8-9). Dealing with family issues requires spiritual discernment and dignity. Abraham had learned through experience not to take things into his own hands. Abraham was very gracious with Lot, giving him the choice of where he wanted to take his family, his flocks, and his herds. Lot makes a business decision that would be the downfall of his family spiritually forever (Genesis 13:10-11). Lot seemed to think that Sodom would be a great place to bring up his family. Abraham on the other hand dwelled where God wanted him to be, in the promised land of Canaan (Genesis 13:12).

Lot was never far from Abraham’s thoughts; he had a great concern for his nephew. Abraham knew everything that was going on around him; he was well informed and he was a wealthy, powerful man in the area. Abraham heard that Lot and his family had been caught up in a war and had been captured (Genesis 14:12-13). He took his trained servants out and set Lot free (Genesis 14:14-16). Abraham was very concerned when his nephew settled in Sodom with his family. Abraham was a believer who was separated from the evil that went on in Sodom. He pleaded with God for Lot and his family after he heard from God of the judgement that was coming to Sodom (see Genesis 18). Abraham’s attitude toward his nephew was never “It serves him right; he has made his bed so he can lie in it”. Abraham was always concerned and prayed for Lot and his family.

In Genesis 16 we have domestic strife in Abraham’s home. God made a promise to Abraham that he and his wife, Sarah, would have a son. Abraham and Sarah were both very old at this time and Sarah was barren; she had never been able to have children. Instead of waiting on God’s time, Sarah makes Abraham a suggestion that he should have children to her servant Hagar (Genesis 16:3-4). Why did Sarah suggest this plan of action? She was very old and maybe doubted the fact that she could have children. She maybe decided that she needed to get involved to hurry things along. Unfortunately, as a family they would have to pay a price for this decision. Hagar was Egyptian;

she most probably was brought out from the time that Abraham made the wrong decision to flee to Egypt from the famine. Abraham and Hagar had a son called Ishmael (Genesis 16:15). Whenever Sarah saw that Hagar was pregnant, she was jealous and vented her anger on her. Hagar runs away as the pressures become too great, but God was watching her and persuades her to return to Sarah (Genesis 16:7-8). Sarah blames Abraham for what happened but it was her suggestion! Things must have been difficult for Abraham; it was his son after all and he loved him. In Genesis 17:18 Abraham pleads with God that Ishmael would walk before God.

What are our desires for our children? Is our first desire that they would go on in God's things? Maybe we would prefer that they do well in this world, get married; have a nice house and a good job. Be careful what the desires of your heart are for your children; God knows your thoughts! We should be like Abraham and covet our children for the Lord. Fathers in particular be careful! You are the head of your house. Abraham really failed as the head of his house and this brought him years of strife. A home requires discipline and spiritual direction at all times.

Soon there was great joy; Sarah was pregnant 25 years after God had made the promise to Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son. The happy home soon erupted when Ishmael showed his true character as he mocks Isaac in front of Sarah (Genesis 21:9). Ishmael, although brought up in a 'Christian' home, was a rebel. He had a faithful father and he had no reason to neglect the witness of his mother. He had been born into a family of high privilege but he turns his back on spiritual things. Abraham, with a broken heart, had no choice but to dismiss him and his mother from his house (Genesis 21:14). Ishmael would speak to us of the flesh; the Spirit and the flesh will always war together: one must go to make room for the other. Hagar and Ishmael would make their home in the wilderness and would always be at war with the seed of Isaac. That strife, between Jew and Arab, continues today. Sometimes we have to make very difficult decisions with our families.

God shows His wonderful grace toward Hagar and Ishmael. God hears Hagar's crying and tells her that He had heard Ishmael's voice cry out and promises Hagar that He would make of him a great nation (Genesis 21:17-18). God continued to be with Ishmael as he grew up in the wilderness. Hagar took a wife from Egypt for Ishmael (Genesis 21:21). We see here that although Hagar and Ishmael were outside of God's promise, away from the house of Abraham, God lovingly cares for them. God loves our children, yes, even the ones who have gone against His principles and his will. Behind the scenes, God is still at work with our families.

In Genesis 22 we have a lovely chapter where we see Abraham's faith and obedience to God's command to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice (Genesis 22:2). We also see Isaac's submission to his father as he carries the wood and as he allows himself to be tied to the altar (Genesis 22:6-7). We see the closeness of the relationship between father and son as they walked three days together in the mountains of Moriah (Genesis 22:5). Over the years, Abraham had learned through experience to be obedient to God. He had learned to trust God's way for his life. He had confidence and believed fully that God was in control. God took Abraham to the limit, even to the point where the knife was raised to slay Isaac (Genesis 22:10). God provided a substitute for Isaac, a ram caught in a bush (Genesis 22:13). Abraham proved his faithfulness toward God. We will be faced with a choice sometimes between our family and God. We must be careful not to make the same mistake as Eli made when he honoured his sons before he honoured God (see 1 Samuel 3:13).

Sarah was one hundred and twenty seven years old when she died. Just for your interest, she is the only woman whose age is recorded in the Bible. Abraham mourned and wept for Sarah, his beloved wife; he would reflect over the years he spent with her. Abraham had to organise the funeral, he had no real estate of his own. He lived in a tent, he had no fixed dwelling place on earth. Abraham was an excellent witness to the children of Heth in the way he conducted his business with them. Abraham had learned from bitter experience once more of the embarrassment and shame when he had told lies in the past.

In Genesis 24:1 we read: "*And Abraham was old, and well stricken in age: and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things.*" Here we have the wise old man, Abraham, counting his blessings but still having the right desires for his son, Isaac. He had to find him a wife, not just any wife; the right choice had to be made. She had to come from his own people, not a stranger or foreigner. She had also to be willing to come in faith and trust without seeing or meeting Isaac. Rebekah is brought into the story and she comes willingly and Isaac takes her to be his wife. Rebekah was suitable for Isaac and Isaac loved her. Do we desire a Christian for our son or our daughter's life partner? Are we on our knees praying that they will make a correct God given choice? Abraham had learned from bitter experience in his household that the right wife for Isaac was so important!

Abraham marries Keturah (Genesis 25:1) and has a further six sons (Genesis 25:2) and as we remarked earlier only one showed any signs of spirituality. In Genesis 18:19 we read what God says about Abraham: "*For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgement; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.*" So even with Abraham's guidance, there was no guarantee that his children would continue in the way of the LORD.

Abraham was very wise and just before he dies makes sure that his will is in order and his inheritance is passed on as he wishes. He did not want any arguments or trouble so he gave gifts to all the sons of his concubines and sent them away so there was no trouble with Isaac (Genesis 25:6). Isaac, the son of promise, was given everything (Genesis 22:5). It is lovely to see that in Genesis 25:9 Ishmael puts aside his feelings about his brother and, along with Isaac, they bury their father. How often in times of death does it happen that families will not talk, to each other because of past differences? No respect is shown for the one who has died!

There are so many lessons for us from the life of Abraham. I am sure each one who hears this message will be challenged in some way or another. Can I leave you with a verse of encouragement for godly parents who desire the Lord's things for their children? Proverbs 22:6: *"Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it."* We only have a short time to influence our family when they are young. But as we get older we must continue to be a witness to them in our lives. We must also trust God for our families and our relations. We must continually bring them to the Lord in prayer.

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