

## Bible perspectives and prophecies

God is the author of the whole Bible. So, the **perspective on life** that we can learn from it is the perspective that God wants us to appreciate. The promises that we read are guaranteed by divine power. The prophecies that we read were written down by His inspired servants – so they are reliable as well as amazing. In particular, we must appreciate that the gospel message brought by Jesus was rooted in the Old Testament - it was woven into the law and the writings of the prophets and of others (even into the poetic books). Without a proper understanding of – and belief in – the Old Testament prophecies about Jesus and the promises concerning what he would achieve, we cannot properly understand the good news, the message of salvation, which was taught by Jesus and then by his apostles in the New Testament.

Unfortunately, there is sometimes a tendency to ignore the Old Testament and not to regard it as being important or relevant today. Some religious leaders and their training courses promote the idea that the Old Testament is an imperfect record of the Jewish people which was written ‘to make sense of events in their yesterday’. By dismissing the Old Testament in this way, such theologians demonstrate ignorance of the gospel message itself. Paul made the position clear: “the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the Gospel beforehand to Abraham” (Galatians 3:8).

Abraham lived two thousand years before Jesus was born, starting life in what is now Iraq, and yet he had the **Gospel** preached to him and this fact is recorded in the very first book of the Old Testament. Elsewhere in the letter to the Galatian believers, we find more information about this Gospel or ‘good news’ which was preached to Abraham. We are told that Abraham believed in this Gospel and that this faith made him righteous in God’s sight. Moreover we learn that, because of Abraham’s faith, other people, like us, can be justified or ‘made righteous’ too, if we have faith in these same things (Galatians 3:6-8). We also read that - by developing such faith and through immersion - people from any nation can be regarded as heirs of Abraham and the promises made to him (Galatians 3:27-29).

What did Abraham believe in order to deserve such a blessing? What exactly were the promises that God made to him? And what does it mean to be ‘justified’? These things are clearly important if we are to understand the Gospel message. Let’s look in Genesis where God made promises to Abraham – the events to which the apostle Paul is referring. At the age of seventy-five, Abraham was told to leave everything that he had and to put his trust in God, who would take him to a new land. In return for placing his trust in God and obeying His instructions, God made a prophecy about what would happen to him: God promised Abraham that he would possess this new land forever, and that he would have innumerable descendants who would become a great nation and that all families of the earth would receive a blessing through him (Genesis 12:1-3, 13:14-17). Later in Genesis, we read that Abraham “believed God” and that God accounted this belief as “righteousness” in His sight (Genesis 15:1-6); further on, we read that God was so pleased with Abraham’s faith that he solemnised His promises by making a formal covenant with him (Genesis 17:4-9). Genesis tells us how Abraham did indeed follow God’s instructions and leave his home in Ur, to travel to the land of Canaan which was inhabited at that time by local tribes. We also learn that, when he was ninety years old, he had still not received any of the land as a possession – in fact he never did in his lifetime.

In the letter to the Hebrews, we are told that Abraham lived in the land of Canaan as an alien in a foreign land and that he died there at the age of one hundred and seventy-five without having received the promises God had made to him. And yet, he continued to believe in them; he never lost faith in God and God continued to add detail to the promises which He had made. God told Abraham that his family would include kings and that the covenant which He had made with Abraham would be everlasting (Hebrews 11:6,39, Genesis 17:4-9).

Now consider that God made promises to Abraham - and that Abraham didn’t receive them during his lifetime. In order to receive the promises, Abraham will have to be resurrected and to live forever on the earth!

We can now begin to appreciate what profound and wonderful promises God had made to Abraham, and what faith Abraham had to believe them. We can also see, in the implications of these promises, the significance of what Paul is telling us in the letter to the Galatians. Paul says that the Gospel preached to Abraham consisted of the promise that he personally would live forever in the promised land and that through him all people on the earth could be justified, declared righteous, and therefore partake in that promise of immortal life on the earth. It was Abraham’s belief in these promises that made him righteous in God’s sight (Galatians 3:6-8,24).

But what was it about Abraham that so pleased God that He picked him out to receive such momentous promises and was also willing to regard him as ‘righteous’ or justified from sin? We have already learned that Abraham trusted God with his whole future by obeying his instruction to leave everything he had and travel to a new land. We have also learned that Abraham believed that he would live forever on the earth. (*This is*

*confirmed in Hebrews where we read that, although Abraham never received the land in his lifetime, he retained an unshakeable belief that one day he would be resurrected, to live again on the earth forever – please read Hebrews 11:8-13.)* Further on in this chapter of Hebrews, we read that what pleased God the most was that Abraham demonstrated the strength of his faith by rising to a momentous challenge. Abraham's faith was so profound that he had been willing to offer his precious, only son to God as a sacrifice, firmly believing that God would be able to bring him back from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19).

If we go back to the record of this event, in Genesis 22:1-18, we read that God told Abraham to offer his precious son, Isaac, as a burnt offering on the top of Mount Moriah. Abraham did not question God, but instead rose early the following morning and took Isaac and the wood needed to burn the sacrifice and took them with him to the top of the mountain. Isaac there allowed himself to be bound and Abraham laid him on the pile of wood and prepared to kill him. What happened next was hugely important because, having seen that Abraham was prepared to obey and to go through with the awful killing and burning of his son as a sacrifice, at the last-minute God stopped him from doing so. (A ram was provided as a sacrifice instead.)

This was a momentous and significant event because it tells us three important things...

- > Firstly: it shows that Abraham believed that God could bring Isaac back from the dead
- > Secondly: it was an acknowledgement by Abraham that God was righteous in asking for a sacrifice and
- > Thirdly: God's provision of a ram to die taught that He Himself would provide the necessary sacrifice – a promise which clearly pointed forwards to the death of Jesus Christ.

All this is explained to us in the book of Acts where we find a reference to another Old Testament prophecy about Jesus Christ. This passage, Acts 8:32-38, includes a quotation from Isaiah - a well-known prophecy about a sheep which is an offering for sin and through whose death many would be justified (Isaiah 53:7-11). Philip explains that this prophecy was fulfilled by Jesus. The importance of believing and understanding why Jesus died and what his shed blood represented is explained in the letter to the Romans. Here we read that, although we are all sinful, we can be justified in the sight of God through the blood of Jesus (Romans 4:23-25). Further on, we read that we are justified by faith in the saving blood of Christ and that through this justification and faith we can have peace with God. We can have our sins forgiven and we can be saved from the death that is a consequence of that sin (Romans 5:1-9).

So now we can see just how it was that the Gospel was preached to Abraham: all the elements of the good news were there in the promises that God made to him. The promise of eternal life on the earth was made possible because Abraham would have a descendent, the Lord Jesus. Through his death on the cross, we can be accounted righteous, having had our sins forgiven by the shedding of his blood.

Abraham was not the only Old Testament character to receive promises and prophecies about Jesus Christ, his saving sacrifice and life forever on the earth. The angel Gabriel told Mary that she would give birth to a son. She was told that his name would be 'Jesus' (which means 'God saves') and that this saviour would be the son of God. Gabriel quoted from a prophecy made a thousand years earlier to one of Abraham's most famous descendants, King David. In this prophecy, David was promised that one of his descendants would sit on his throne and rule over an everlasting kingdom (Luke 1:26-55, 2 Samuel 7:8-16). This prophecy about Jesus is celebrated in the book of Psalms, where we have confirmed for us the promise made to Abraham that this everlasting kingdom would consist of all nations of the earth, and here it is made clear to us that the king, Jesus Christ, would be son of God (Psalm 2:1-9, 89:3-4).

In summary then, we have seen that the Gospel is indeed embedded in the Old Testament. It consists of the promise (made to Abraham right back in the book of Genesis) that one of his descendants would be Jesus, the saviour, the son of God - and that, through the death of this perfect sacrifice, we can have our sins forgiven and be made righteous in the eyes of God. Because of this, we can live forever – with Abraham – in God's kingdom on the earth. What we must do to be part of these promises is to believe in them and to be immersed. As Paul goes on to say, "for as many as you as have been immersed into Christ have put on Christ... And if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:27-29).

This certainly changes our perspective on life now – as well as in that glorious, peaceful, future.