

Being God's Friends

What would it look like?

“Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.” James 2:23, KJV

Common to all three of the world's monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are the respect, if not reverence, they hold for Abraham. Though differing on many points, all three faiths find a common contact in the person of Abraham (Jewish, *Genesis* 12-25; Christian, *Romans* 4:1-25; Muslim, *Koran*, Sura II. 124-140) For Christians, the faith of Abraham serves as a prototype. Abraham was justified by faith. Abraham “believed in the Lord; and He [the Lord] reckoned it to him [Abraham] as righteousness” (*Genesis* 15:6; See *Romans* 4:3, 20-22; *Galatians* 3:6; *James* 2:23.). And as Abraham was right with God by faith, so too is every true Christian believer. Genuine Christians believe God's Gospel and are saved (See *1 Corinthians* 15:3-4; *Romans* 10:8-11.).

But given the prominence of the patriarch among the three monotheistic religions, it should not surprise us that Abraham's God was targeted for ridicule by at least one of “the new atheists.” In an obvious linking of Abraham to the cultic excesses of Jim Jones (“about which,” he says, “we raise a bit more than a skeptical eyebrow”), and the religious jihad of Osama bin Laden (whom he says “we may leave . . . alone until he turns out to be planning, in a nonphantasmal way, the joy of suicide bombing”), Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011) remarked:

But if these things can be preached under the protection of an established religion, we are expected to take them at face value. All three monotheisms . . . praise Abraham for being willing to hear voices and then to take his son Isaac for a long and rather mad and gloomy walk. And then the caprice by which his murderous hand is finally stayed is written down as divine mercy. [1]

There you have it: For reason of guilt by association with two modern day villains—Jones and bin Laden—who lived four-thousand years after Abraham, God does not exist. We might label Hitchens' protest the “immoral argument against the existence of God.”

Nevertheless, the Bible singles out, despite all his human failings, Abraham as one its great, if not the greatest, examples of faith. The historical narrative of his life personifies what it means to really believe God. At a time in world history when it can be doubted that God had many friends, Scripture records Abraham was “the friend of God” (*James* 2:23). What did it mean—being God's friend? How does one become a friend of God? What does a friendship with God look like? At least one pastor teaches that we can become God's “best” friends by saying “breath-prayers” to Him. [2] But other pastors—consider me to be one—think that friendship with God, like Abraham's, entails, as in a marriage, continuing fidelity to Him. And in Abraham's life, including his trek into the wilderness with Isaac, we can see what friendship with God looks like.

His life evidences at least five characteristics which reflect that his friendship was based upon fidelity to God's promise.

First, faith follows God no matter where He might lead. Abraham was born, grew up, and lived in the ancient Babylonian city of Ur for seventy-five years. At an age in our culture when many people have retired and moved to Florida (Because Abraham lived to be 175, I do realize that we're not comparing apples with apples.), God called Abraham to separate from his comfort zone and relocate. The Lord told Abraham, "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee" (Genesis 12:1, KJV). God called Abraham to leave his family, who incidentally, were idolaters (Joshua 24:2), and the comforts and familiarity of Ur to immigrate to what for him was an unknown land and destination. You see, Abraham valued obedience to the Lord above loyalty to his family (See Matthew 10:36-37a.). So in this sense, faith is willing to travel to destinations known only by God. God's friends leave idols to pursue a journey with the God even though they cannot see Him. All they possess is His Word.

Secondly, faith perseveres with God. In addition to the land that God promised Abraham's descendants would possess in perpetuity, God promised Abraham a progeny, an heir to the Promise. God swore to the patriarch, "I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great . . ." (Genesis 12:2; See Genesis 17:4b-5; 18:18.). But with God's promise to Abram there was but one problem: At the time when God made the promise, Abram and his wife Sarah were childless and respectively, past their procreative years. But "In hope against hope he believed, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, 'So shall your descendants be'" (Romans 4:18).

In a faraway country and in the future, God promised Abram that Sarah would bear him a son. But for that promise to be fulfilled Abram had to wait—to interminably wait amidst God's repeated promises, his accumulating doubts causing him to take matters into his own hands—for twenty-five years. Yet in spite of his failure to make God work for him by taking Hagar to wife, Abraham eventually "did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform" (Romans 4:20-21). Though Abram's faith was not perfect—to protect himself, he lied to Abimelech that Sarah was his sister (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18); to insure the safety of his estate, he appointed Eliezer as his heir (Genesis 15:2-3); and to provide himself an heir, he fathered Ishmael through Sarah's handmaid, Hagar (Genesis 16:1-4)—by faith he tenaciously persisted. In spite of all his human failings, Abraham did not separate from or give up on his Friend.

Third, faith looks to God. Trust can involve arduous travel and inconvenient living. While through human eyes the journey might be uncertain, the destination is sure. Hebrews says, "By faith [Abraham] sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:9-10, KJV). Abraham was not quite at home in this world. Likewise, all of us ought to be reminded that the world in which we live is our Canaan, and we ought not to become too comfortable among the comforts of our earthly surroundings. Increasingly, our planet appears as if it's a lunatic asylum being run by lunatics. Canaanites are in control—of the economy, the society, the arts, the

politics, the education, and increasingly, even the churches. All of the sins we see placarded and on parade in our culture were prevalent during Abraham's lifetime. Ever heard of Sodom and Gomorrah, cities where Abraham's nephew Lot chose to live?

In our earthly journey, we must remember we are all "temps" living in "tents" (2 Corinthians 5:1). In spite of health foods, exercise clubs, doctors, medications, and hospitals, we're only here for a little while. Death will take us. But like Abraham, we ought to be looking for the city whose builder and maker is God. Jesus told His disciples that He was going to prepare a place for them (John 14:1-6). The expectation and anticipation of all believers ought to be that one day they will find eternal residence in God's New Jerusalem, the eternal city which is His dwelling place (Revelation 21:1-4). Paul knew it and wrote to the early Christians, "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 4:20). Unlike Esau, God's true children will not consider it wise to exchange the temporal pleasure of this world's pottage for the prospect of God's eternal promise. The destination of our journey is certain, and "Only one life will soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last!" We Christians ought to keenly anticipate the time when we shall dwell in the city of our Friend!

Fourth, *faith takes risks* for God. It dares. The God who promised and gave Abraham a son, then asked him to sacrifice that son. The incident:

God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of" (Genesis 22:1-2, KJV).

This is the incident Christopher Hitchens found revolting and mocked. God's request of Abraham gave the atheist reason, or so he thought, to reject and ridicule Abraham's Friend.

In my mind, however, the controversy that may surround this incident in Abraham's life can be resolved in at least four ways. *One*, God did not let Abraham sacrifice Isaac, did He? End of story. God intervened and would not let it happen because of His promise. *Two*, the translation of "tempt" (KJV) is unfortunate, and reflects negatively upon God. God did not order Abraham to the land of Moriah *to tempt him*, but *to test him*, to prove both the reality and validity of his faith in the divine promise; that via the son of the Promise a nation would descend from him. Dead sons don't have children. End of story. Yet God promised Abraham that he would have grandchildren. So Abraham believed in the God of life, the God of resurrection life! *Three*, the moral lesson of this incident for Abraham and Israel was that, in contrast to the surrounding Canaanites, human sacrifice was neither a necessary nor acceptable means by which to approach God (See Leviticus 18:21; Deuteronomy 12:31.). **[3]** One newspaper writer observed that "God's testing of Abraham taught, among other things, that the then widespread practice of child-sacrifice was contrary to God's will, and must be put to an end forever." **[4]** And *four*, the incident of the near-sacrifice of Isaac directed Abraham to God's gracious promise and provision. Friends believe friends will help and intervene on their behalf. As Abraham believed, God performed an "intervention" and supplied the lamb (Genesis 22:8). Perhaps this is the

sense in how we ought to understand Jesus' statement to the Jews—[by faith] "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). God provided a lamb to take Isaac's place. Likewise, the Father has provided His Lamb, "unblemished and spotless," to take our place, to die on the cross for our sins (1 Peter 1:18-21). Like Abraham we ought to by faith rejoice in God's gracious provision for the forgiveness of our sins, His intervention on our behalf, and show ourselves to be His friend. Friends accept the gifts of friends.

Fifth, and finally, *faith reverences* God. After intervening on behalf of both Abraham and Isaac, the angel of the Lord told the patriarch, "I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (Genesis 22:12b). Proverbs says the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10). That being the case, any denial of Him is the height of fearlessness . . . and folly (Psalm 14:1; 53:1). Unlike many in our culture, Abraham did not worship at the cult of the child. Abraham valued God even above his own son. Unlike many in the church today, Abraham stood in awe of God. **[5]** As one dictionary defines it: "This is not simple fear, but reverence, whereby an individual recognizes the power and position of the individual revered and renders him proper respect." **[6]** Likewise, R.C. Sproul observed that like Luther "we are to fear God not with a servile fear like that of a prisoner before his tormentor but as children who do not wish to displease their beloved Father." **[7]** Or we might put it like this: to be God's friend it should be in our hearts not to want to displease Him. Any friends must respect "the relationship" of friendship.

Because of Abraham's interaction with God, and the example of the great patriarch's faith to our lives, we should not find reason to doubt God exists. Rather, by Abraham's example and life parallels (Take a few minutes to think about the evidences of the parallels in your life.), we ought to find renewed confidence that through faith in God's Lamb and leading we too are friends with Him.

In Christ, the God of Abraham is eternally trustworthy. All he asks from us is our trust and like Abraham, we will become and be His friends. This trust of friendship is one which involves looking to Him, believing His promises in Christ, journeying to destinations perhaps known only to Him, loving Him more dearly than any other earthly person, and reverencing Him. In the end, may we like Abraham, be known as friends of God. Through Christ and the Spirit I trust I am one, and hope you are too.

ENDNOTES

[1] Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2007): 53.

[2] Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002): 85-91.

[3] The divine prohibitions read: "Neither shall you give any of your offspring to offer them to Molech . . ." (Leviticus 18:21; "You shall not behave thus toward the Lord your God, for every abominable act which the Lord hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods" (Deuteronomy 12:31).

[4] Peter Berkowitz, "The New Atheism," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 16, 2007.

[5] See Pastor Larry DeBruyn, "No Fear: On the Moral Collapse in the Pan-Evangelical

Nation," *Guarding His Flock Ministries*, November 11, 2009
([Phttp://guardinghisflock.com/2009/11/18/no-fear/#more-240](http://guardinghisflock.com/2009/11/18/no-fear/#more-240)).

[6] Merrill F. Unger and William White, Jr., *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*
(Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980): 130.

[7] R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1985): 197.