

Abraham, the friend of God

Introduction

I wonder how you would answer the question, *'Who is the most important person in the Bible, apart from Jesus?'* It is by no means an easy task, as there are so many who could fit into this category. For example, we could think of Moses, the great lawgiver, or David, Israel's greatest king and author of so many of the psalms. Then, coming into the New Testament, we could think of Paul, the great apostle and pioneer missionary and teacher of the early church. But one person who could very easily supply the answer to our question is Abraham, the father of all who believe. His life is recorded in some detail in the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, from chapter 11 onwards. In 2 Chronicles 20:7 and James 2:23 Abraham is called *'the friend of God'* because of his close relationship with the Lord and his faithfulness to him.

In this short booklet we are going to look at three episodes in his life, and each of them gives us a glimpse of this godly man's experience of trust in and obedience to the living God. I am grateful to David Marshall, the pastor of Trinity Reformed Baptist Church, Hamilton, New Zealand for the *Sound Words* programmes he recorded about Abraham, and which form the basis for this study booklet. David's own testimony is found after the chapters on Abraham.

Derek French

September 1996

Chapter 1 Abraham's Importance

Abraham's background is interesting for one who is known as a man of God. In the Old Testament book of Joshua we read in Joshua 24:2, *"Joshua said to all the people, 'This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River (ie. the Euphrates) and worshipped other gods.'" In other words, Abraham's father and his family did not worship the true and living God at all to begin with. Instead, they ignored him and worshipped idols made of wood, metal or stone.*

Sadly, this is not uncommon today and is a very unwise thing when you think about it. These things are dead and lifeless. They are not able to influence anything here on this earth. And yet thousands of people still worship such idols which cannot help them at all. The prophet Jeremiah exhorted the people of his day not to be afraid or captivated by idols. We read in Jeremiah 10:3-5, *"... the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good."* In contrast to these idols, Jeremiah went on to write about God in the next verses, *"No-one is like you, O Lord; you are great, and your name is mighty in power. Who should not revere*

you, O King of the nations? This is your due. Among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is no-one like you."

Yet in spite of the uselessness of idolatry, Abraham's family were worshippers of false gods. This then raises the question, 'Why was Abraham so important, if his family were idol-worshippers?' It is because of the grace of God that was shown to Abraham. God called him to believe and to follow him. What God said is recorded in Genesis 12:1: "*Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.*" This, of course, meant forsaking his family's idols and trusting in God alone. And Abraham did just that; he believed in and followed the Lord. And then God gave him three promises. The first was the land of Canaan, or Israel as we know it today; the second was that he would have descendants as numerous as the sand on the seashore, and the third was that he would be a blessing to all peoples (see Genesis 12:2-3; 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:5; 17:2; 22:17).

The whole of the Bible, from the 12th chapter of Genesis onward, is really concerned with the fulfilment of these promises. We see this especially with the most important of the promises, and that is the third one: that Abraham would be a blessing to all peoples. And this itself was worked out in three ways:

(i) Through the contribution of the Jewish and Arab peoples, who were Abraham's descendants, to the advancement of human society. Both these peoples made wonderful advances in the areas of medicine, of

philosophy, mathematics and science. And in so doing, contributed to the general wellbeing of the world at large. One particularly famous descendant of Abraham was Albert Einstein, whose work in the area of physics was so important in the developments in that area of human knowledge in the early part of the twentieth century.

(ii) Through the Bible, of which the Old Testament part was given to the Jewish people. Paul wrote in Romans 3:2, "*They have been entrusted with the very words of God.*" These words are found in the Bible, in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. In fact, the Bible is the Word of God. Paul was referring in particular to the Old Testament when he wrote those words in Romans. And we must say that it was crucial for this to have happened, because without God's Word we would not know what God is like. We would know that such a God existed because of the world and universe which he created, but we would not have any detailed knowledge of what he is like and what he expects of us. For example, the Bible teaches us that God is infinite. And that means he is very great, and beyond anything we can even begin to imagine. The Bible also tells us that God is in every place, that God knows all things, and that God is all powerful. It tells us he is good, and gracious, and patient and wise. And so much more. This means that, obviously, he is quite different from the idols that Abraham and his family worshipped first of all. There is no comparison between these little statues and figures, and the God

who made the heavens and the earth. Abraham would never have known God in this way if God had not actually spoken to him, and then to his descendants. He could have looked at the wonders of creation, the wonders of the world around him, and realised that there must be a great God, but he would not have known what that God was like. So this was a very wonderful privilege given to Abraham and to his descendants. God actually entrusted his Word to them in that way. They were chosen above all other peoples to be given this revelation of God, and in turn are made a blessing to the world even today, because we have the Bible and can read it and discover what God is like for ourselves. As with all of God's gifts, this was a most merciful one, that he should give his Word to a former idol worshipper who, on that ground alone, was undeserving of such a blessing. It is all of God's grace, and that is, of course, the great message of the Bible, from one end to the other, that God gives gifts to people who do not deserve them, especially the gift of everlasting life.

- (iii) The third way in which this promise was fulfilled is, in fact, the greatest. The third way was through the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ who was, of course, born of a Jewish mother, Mary, and who lived, taught, and died in the land of Canaan, the land of Israel. The Lord Jesus was a direct descendant of Abraham through King David, the famous king we mentioned in the introduction. Matthew 1 gives us the details of his genealogy or family tree. This is the most important

and most precious part of the fulfilment of the promise that God gave to Abraham, because the Lord Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world. He was given to the Jews first, but also to the Gentiles, to all of the world's people. He is the only person through whom our sins can be forgiven so that we can become right with God. The greatest part of the blessing that God promised to Abraham when he said that "*all the peoples of the world would be blessed through him*", is through the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, these other things, the land and his descendants, all led up to the climax of the blessing, the coming of the Lord Jesus.

This third aspect of the promise needs to be emphasised because it is so important. The Bible speaks of Jesus as the Saviour of the world (1 John 4:14). And that raises the questions, 'In what way is he the Saviour of the world?' and, 'How did he accomplish that salvation?' The answer lies in his death on the cross and its purpose. He died to bear the punishment of God for sin. Sin is terrible in God's sight. God has to punish sin. He is a holy God. He cannot tolerate wrongdoing. And that penalty is described in Romans 6:23: "*The wages of sin is death...*" (See also Genesis 2:17; Proverbs 10:16; Ezekiel 18:4; Romans 1:32.) Out of his great love for sinful people, God sent his Son to pay the penalty for sin. The Bible teaches us in Romans 3:23 that "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*"

In the Old Testament, we find the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. These Ten Commandments summarise for us what God expects of us.

They are his standard for living, his law. Now, it is our failure to keep these commandments that teaches us we are sinners, and therefore under God's judgment. We must say, therefore, that we are the ones who deserve to be punished by God. And that raises another important question: 'Why did God punish the Lord Jesus Christ when the Bible teaches us he had no sin of his own?' He kept the Ten Commandments perfectly. He did everything God required of him. There was never any rebellion in his heart against the directions of God (see 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15, 7:26; 1 Peter 2:22; 1 John 3:5). The wonderful answer to our question is simply this: the Lord Jesus did not die for his own sin; he died for the sins of others! Now, God had to punish sin, because if he did not punish sin, he would not be a just God. He would be compromising and cease to be holy if he tolerated sin. He would not be a good God if he condoned evil. But in his great love and grace, the Lord Jesus died on behalf of all who would put their faith and trust in him. He died in the place of others. He died to save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). He bore their punishment for them when he died on the cross.

God has promised that anybody who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ will have their sins forgiven. The Bible says in Romans 10:13, "*Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.*" It does not matter what country we were born in, or what language we speak, or what background we have, whether we are rich or poor, whether we are very clever, or find it difficult to read and write. It makes no difference whatsoever. Whoever believes on the

Lord Jesus Christ will be saved (see John 3:16; Acts 16:31). This is very wonderful. It is good news. It also shows us why we said earlier that this was the most important of those promises that God gave to Abraham, and really why Abraham is such an important figure. Every blessing that we have, every blessing of salvation, ultimately comes from those three promises given to Abraham, nearly 4,000 years ago.

As we draw this chapter to a close, we must stress one very important thing about Abraham.. The Bible describes him in Romans 4:11 as, "*the father of all who believe.*" This emphasises the importance for us to believe personally in God, and especially to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation is only given to those who believe. We cannot expect that God will accept us into heaven if we have not believed in his Son. To believe in the Lord Jesus means two things:

- (a) It means that we must have some knowledge. We must know that there is a God, and that Jesus Christ is his Son. We must assent to those statements.
- (b) It means we must trust in Jesus Christ. It is not enough just to know about him; it is not enough to go to church, or to try to live the best life that we can. We have to trust in him to save us. This trust is essential, for without it we cannot be forgiven. Many people will say they believe that there is a God, but so do the demons and they are not saved (James 2:19), because they do not trust in the Lord Jesus. The need for this personal trust in the Lord Jesus is absolutely essential if we are to enjoy the blessings of God. The Bible says

in Acts 4:12, *“Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”* The great question is, do you have that same trust? It is the trust that Abraham displayed when God called him to follow him all those years ago.

Chapter 2 An Unusual Encounter With God

In our last chapter we saw how the Lord called Abraham to follow him, and also gave him those rather special promises regarding the land of Canaan and his descendants, and that he would be a blessing to all peoples. And this call of God was the turning point in his life, after which he experienced daily fellowship with the Lord. One of the most unusual encounters he had with God is recorded for us in Genesis 15. In the previous chapter, Abraham had won a great military victory. The result of this was that he became a very important and influential person in the area in which he lived. But he was still in a vulnerable position because, at that point, he did not have an heir. He had no son, and of course, all the promises God had given him were to be tied up in that son and in the descendants who would be born in his family line.

a. The promise of protection

It was at this precise time that the Lord came to Abraham and, in a wonderful way, spent a period of more than 24 hours with him. We read in Genesis 15:1 how this began: *“After this, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a*

vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.’” Now this was a wonderful promise, because God was not saying to Abraham, ‘I will provide a shield for you’, but ‘Abraham, I myself will be a shield for you. I myself will protect you and I myself will be your very great reward.’ This, to say the least, is a most remarkable statement for almighty God to say to a mere man. It is very similar to the words of Psalm 34:7: *“The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.”* Nothing would be allowed to stop God fulfilling his purposes for Abraham, and no danger he might face would be able to separate him from God’s loving care. And the wonder of it is that it is as true for Christian believers today as it was for Abraham, nearly four thousand years ago (see Romans 8:31-39).

b. The promise of a son

Although he had this wonderful promise, Abraham was still filled with a measure of perplexity, and he spoke to God about it (Genesis 15:2-3): *“But Abram said, ‘O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.’”* And then God said some most reassuring words to Abraham (verses 4-5): *“Then the word of the Lord came to him: ‘This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.’ He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’”* God was emphasising that

his promises are always true, and he never fails to fulfil them, however impossible it may seem to us. By this time Abraham was quite old. He was well past the normal age of being a father and could not have expected to have children at that age. And yet here is the promise of God repeated to him, that he would have a son from his own body. Abraham was probably thinking, ‘This is impossible; I’m an old man now, and God has said I’m going to have descendants, but humanly speaking, surely, this could never be.’ God came to him in this remarkable way, and in reiterating the initial promise that he gave him early on, he was teaching Abraham that he could trust him with confidence, his promise was not a lie, and that his Word was, and we can add still is, totally reliable.

The lesson for us is that we, as believers, must not look to the circumstances we may find ourselves in. Instead, we must trust in God, even if our situation does not seem one where God could provide the things that he has promised for us. He will not fail to keep his Word.

We are also given a glimpse here of the fatherly care of God for his children. He knows that we need to hear his promises again and again. He is aware of the frailty of our faith, because we do tend to doubt, especially when our outward circumstances are difficult and hard. It is very easy for us to be tempted to think, ‘Well, is God really with me? He has promised to be with me, but is he really?’ And God graciously reminds us of his promises again and again to reassure us in our moments of weakness. He is absolutely reliable, and his promises are true, and he is a loving heavenly Father.

Abraham’s response is most heart-warming to read (Genesis 15:6): “*Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*” He accepted God’s Word with confidence, his doubts were dispelled, and God blessed him beyond his wildest dreams. The righteousness he was credited with is the same as that given by God today to those who put their whole-hearted trust in the Lord Jesus Christ (see Romans 4).

c. The promise of eternal salvation

The next event was that God made a covenant with Abraham. A covenant is a treaty, an agreement between two people. In Abraham’s day these often existed between kings. There were many little kingdoms, more like little cities, scattered around the Middle East. Each was ruled over by its own king. A number of these cities would sometimes be governed by an emperor. Occasionally this emperor was able to gain control over a large number of these smaller kingdoms, resulting in a greater king ruling lesser kings. Then the greater king would make a covenant with each of the lesser kings. He would say, “I want you to swear loyalty to me. In return I will promise to protect you if someone else comes and tries to invade our land.” So in the covenant there was the promise of protection by the greater king, and the responsibility of loyal service by the lesser king.

God took this idea of the covenant and applied it to his relationship as the greater king, if you like, with Abraham as a lesser king here on the earth. God told Abraham to take some animals, a goat, a ram and a cow (Genesis 15:9), and to kill these animals and cut their bodies into two, and

place the two halves opposite each other with a gap in the middle. This was the normal way that a covenant was made in those ancient days. The two kings would make the agreement, then the animals would be cut up and the lesser king would be told to walk between the two piles of carcasses. This was done as a very vivid way of telling the lesser king that if he broke the covenant, if he was disloyal, if he tried to revolt, then he would be cut in two just as those animals had been cut in two! By this threatening activity the lesson was driven home with some force!

Now, the significance of this in the covenant between God and Abraham is really remarkable. We would expect that as Abraham was the lesser person in this covenant, that he would have to walk between the two piles of carcasses, but instead, God himself, in the form of a flaming fire pot (Genesis 15:17-18), came down and moved between those two piles of carcasses! In effect, the Lord was saying to Abraham, “Abraham, if you break the covenant, I myself will bear the penalty for your covenant-breaking!”

It is sad, however, that though God kept his part of the covenant, and fulfilled it in detail, Abraham and his descendants did break the covenant. And what is even more remarkable is that the Lord Jesus Christ came as the one who took the penalty for the covenant breaking of the people of God. That penalty he bore at the cross of Calvary. Jesus did not die for any covenant breaking of his own. He lived according to the Ten Commandments; he lived a perfect life. There was no sin found in him. When he was arrested, the officials could not find anything

to accuse him of, and people who did accuse him were false accusers, who had been bribed to say something wrong. There was nothing that he had ever done or said that was offensive to the holy God. It is almost overwhelming to think that the Lord, that God himself, should actually come and die, and bear the punishment that really we should bear. Yet that is exactly the point of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ: he died bearing our sins and our punishment.

The significance of this for us is that the Lord Jesus Christ did for us, what we cannot do for ourselves. And the result is that we can be forgiven; we can be right with God; we can receive eternal life if we repent of our sins and put our trust in what the Lord Jesus accomplished through his death on the cross. We, like Abraham, can become the friends of God now. Through the Lord Jesus Christ we can be right with God, accepted by him, and live for him both in this life, and then, when we die physically, live with him forever in heaven. Those who trust in the Lord Jesus will never be parted from the God that we know and love. This blessing is given to all who follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Nobody who believes is excluded from this. The Lord has said in Hebrews 13:5, *“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”*

Chapter 3 The Testing Of His Faith

a. The joy of family life

In the goodness of God, and in full accord with his promise, God gave to Abraham and his wife, Sarah, their own child. The baby was a son, who was named Isaac

(Genesis 21). With the birth of Isaac, Abraham could see the beginning of the fulfilment of the great promises God had given him when he first called him. It must have been a most wonderful occasion the day Isaac was born. A day for great rejoicing in God's goodness, and a day that must have strengthened Abraham's devotion and trust in the Lord tremendously. The birth of this son demonstrated so wonderfully that Abraham's trust in the Lord had not been misplaced.

b. The test God set for Abraham

As the years went by we can only imagine how much Isaac must have meant to Abraham. He was, indeed, a very special child. What joy it must have brought his aged father to see his son develop. Many years then passed when Abraham once more heard the voice of God calling to him (Genesis 22:1). However, this time it was not to hear some tremendous promise, but to be given a very hard task. A task that would test his faith to the very limit. What God required of him was that he take his son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loved, to the land of Moriah, and there he was told to sacrifice him! Genesis 22:2: *"Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."*

We may well question why God asked him to do such a thing. And the answer must be that God was concerned to see whether or not Abraham loved him even more than his own family, even his beloved son, Isaac. Knowing that all the promises of God were tied up with Isaac made him very special indeed, but even such a special son was not to take the place of the Lord in Abraham's affections. If

Isaac was more important to Abraham than God, then really it would have meant Abraham had returned to the idolatry his family had practised in earlier years. It would have meant that Isaac had become his idol, in the place of God. So the test was very important, but we must also add, very severe.

Now it is a fact of Christian experience that our faith is tested by God today. Peter wrote about it to his readers in 1 Peter 4:12: *"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you."* And earlier on in that same letter in 1 Peter 1:6-7 he wrote, *"... though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed."* The reason for these tests which indicate if we really do put God first in our lives, is that God is preparing people, Abraham and all of us, for eternity. He does not want spiritual babies, he wants men and women of conviction, men and women of faith, men and women who will live for him with all their hearts. Men and women who are genuine then, rather than just people who pretend to be Christians. He does not want people who just go to church on Sunday morning. He wants people who live for him all the time.

c. The triumph of Abraham's faith

Abraham's reaction to God's command is very interesting. The Bible tells us that the very next day he got up a long

while before dawn and set off with his son, Isaac, and two servants and a donkey. He set off straight away to the land of Moriah to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22:3). He did not protest about what God was asking him to do or argue with God or rebel against him. Remember, Abraham, by this stage in his life was an old man, mature in the faith. And those years of walking with God had taught him that he had to obey whatever God told him to do. His example, of course, is very challenging, because it is so easy to try to excuse ourselves when God asks us to do something difficult. And there is another element here, too. By leaving early Abraham did not have to tell Sarah, his wife, what he was doing, so that she would not be too distressed. So he was very thoughtful and loving towards her as well.

The journey to Moriah was about 70 kilometres from Beersheba where they were living in the southern part of the land of Canaan. Mount Moriah is in the area we now call Jerusalem. And so it took them about 3 days, as we read in Genesis 22:4. And this would only have made the test even greater for Abraham. He knew what awaited him at the end, and each step of the way must have driven home to his heart and mind that his only son was going to die. They must have been the longest days in Abraham's life, not only because of the impending death of Isaac, but also because of another problem that this test posed. There seemed to be a conflict between the promise of God and the command of God. How could his descendants be blessed if he did not have any? If his son was to die, how could there be any descendants for God to bless anyway?

To help us understand what must have gone on in Abraham's heart during that journey we need to turn to the New Testament book of Hebrews. We read in Hebrews 11:17-19, "*By faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.'* **Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead...**" This was both wonderful and remarkable. Abraham's faith must have really grown during that journey. As far as we know there was probably no other man who had ever come to realise that God was able to raise people from the dead, that God was the God of resurrection. Yet Abraham had grasped that truth as he thought about all that God had promised and now commanded him to do. It indicated tremendous dependence upon God, while at the same time being a wonderful step forward in our understanding of the nature of our God. He was already beginning to pass the test, even before he had come to the point of killing Isaac. It was a triumph of his faith over his fears.

When they arrived at Mount Moriah, Abraham told his two servants to stay at the bottom of the mountain with the donkey while he and Isaac went up the mountain. And then he said something very significant to the servants (Genesis 22:5): "*And we will come back to you.*" This, again, indicated that he was really confident that God was going to raise Isaac. As the two figures ascended the mountain carrying the wood and fire for the sacrifice, Isaac, who by now would have been in his teens or early

twenties, inquired of his father, *“Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”* Abraham replied, *“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”* Eventually they reached the top of the mountain, built the altar and put the wood on it. Abraham then bound Isaac, and Isaac must have submitted to that. He was old enough and strong enough to have fought his father and escaped, but there is no record of Isaac struggling or resisting his father at all. Abraham laid him on top of the wood, then he took his knife, raised it above his head and was about to plunge it into the chest of his son. But even as he did that, God intervened. God called to him from heaven. And he said to Abraham, *“Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to harm him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”* It was evident to all, and to the Lord in particular, that Abraham really did love God even more than this very precious son, Isaac.

d. The provision of a substitute

As God called to Abraham to stop, Abraham lifted up his eyes, looked behind him and saw a ram. Now this ram was caught in a bush by its horns and that is very significant. When sacrifices were offered in the Old Testament, the sacrifice had to be without blemish or spot; there was not to be a mark on it. This ram was held by its horns and so its body had not been cut about by the thorns of that bush. This meant it was an animal fit to be offered to God. It was perfect. It was God’s provision, and it was sacrificed in Isaac’s place. The Lord did indeed provide, and Isaac’s life was spared.

Through this incident, Abraham and Isaac saw something that is absolutely wonderful. As that animal was killed upon that altar they saw the wonder of what we call substitutionary atonement. That is, they saw another die in Isaac’s place. And the importance of that was to teach both them and us today that we cannot buy our own salvation. God must provide a sacrifice for us. You see, we are sinners; we deserve death. But if we die in our sin, then we will be cut off from the love of God forever. But God’s provision for sinners is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our substitute. He was like that ram on Mount Moriah; he was perfect, and he died not for his own sin, but he died in the place of others. He bore the punishment and suffering that they deserved. He bore the sins of his people as he hung on the cross. So today, the Christian believer is able to say as Abraham did, the Lord will provide; the Lord has provided. When Abraham said that, he was not just saying something that was relevant to his situation. He, as a prophet, was speaking of things that would happen thousands of years later when the Lord Jesus Christ died for sinners on the cross of Calvary.

e. The lessons for us to learn

- (i) God wants us to learn that we are to obey him, whatever he may call us to do. However, he will not call us to do something that is not consistent with his revealed mind in the Bible.
- (ii) God wants us to understand that we cannot come to him, except through a substitute, except through someone who dies for us, and that, of course, is the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

(iii) God wants us to realise he will test the faith we profess to have, to see if it is genuine. Life will not always be easy. God will bring tests into our lives in order to change us, to chip away at the rough edges of our character, to mould us and to make us into people fit to be with him forever in eternity. And his great purpose is to ensure that we really are those who rely solely upon him and not on ourselves, or anything else, and that he has first place in our lives.

TESTIMONY OF DAVID MARSHALL

As we mentioned in the introduction to this study booklet, David Marshall is the pastor of Trinity Reformed Baptist Church in Hamilton, New Zealand. However, David was not born in New Zealand but in Australia. He is married and has five daughters.

David is a Christian believer now, but that has not always been true of him. Indeed, his own parents were not Christians at all, and never went to church. However, a number of years after his parents were married, his mother was converted and became a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. This wonderful event, however, was not welcomed by his father at all, and the home situation became very unhappy. David's parents argued frequently over her new found faith in the Son of God, with his father disagreeing with this quite strongly. To try and ease the situation, the family started to attend a church which did not believe that the Bible was true, and this in turn only made matters worse. David and his brother were really quite bored with the meetings at that church, and very soon the family stopped attending altogether.

When David was 12 years old, the American evangelist Dr. Billy Graham came to Melbourne, and his mother took him to hear this man several times. David did not become a Christian believer at this point, but it was the first time he ever heard that the Lord Jesus Christ had come to this world and died for sinners, and that if he received him into

his heart he could become a Christian. As he listened to this message, David realised that this was the truth, and it made sense to him, but he was still not converted. His life was not changed at that point, and really for quite a few years he forgot the significance of this good news he had heard.

When David finished school he went to university, and his life was fairly happy. He had many friends and he did well in his studies, and he concluded that he had no need for a religion. But when he was almost 25, his best friend was killed in a plane crash. He was an air force pilot and his Canberra jet bomber crashed and blew up in southern Queensland. And that really shook David, and he had a terrible time as he tried to come to terms with the loss of such a good friend. The result of this was that he really began to grapple with the issue, 'What is the meaning of life?' He thought the answer to this question was that we are here to help other people. He was a school teacher by now, and so he decided that what he needed to do was to give himself to helping the students that he was teaching, hoping that this would satisfy him. What he discovered as he tried to do this was that he did not really want to help the students, he really wanted to look good himself. He was concerned about himself, not about the students at all! It was his self-image and how good he looked to other people that was the motivating force of these endeavours to aid the students.

Interestingly, God intervened in his life in a significant way, because as he was trying to be the very best that he could be, his life started to fall apart. Indeed, he actually

hurt some people very badly, which was the very opposite of what he had intended. What was happening was that God was showing him that he was, in fact, a sinner. Although David did not think of it in those terms, he did realise that he was not the person that he knew he should be. This made him feel very guilty.

While all this was going on, one evening while sitting in his car, he began to think about his life and the mess that it seemed to be becoming. He felt he had to do something, and there were only two things he could think of. One was to take his own life, and he did not want to do that. The other thing was to become a Christian. And he did not want to do that either! After all, he was not a religious person; he was not attending a church; he was not reading his Bible. But he had to do something. And so he found himself, quite to his surprise, bowing his head in that car, and just saying to God, "*God, if you exist, I want you to forgive my sin and to make me a new person. I want you to make something of my life.*" There were no angelic choirs singing, there were no trumpets, there were no drums, in fact there was nothing dramatic, but David had an assurance that he had made his peace with God, and he had indeed become a genuine Christian believer. The result of this was that he began to search out Christian fellowship. He went from church to church in the central part of the city of Melbourne where he was living, seeking for Christian fellowship. At first he had some disappointments. He attended some churches where no one spoke to him, and where he felt that the minister did not know very much about the Christian faith and did not

even seem to believe it! However, eventually some people in a Lutheran church, and then later in a Baptist church began to help him and encourage him in his Christian life.

In those early days as a Christian believer, David had to sort out some of his ideas from his past. For example, up to the time he prayed to God for help he had not really believed that the Bible was true. Then he did not really have any deep conviction that God had created the world. He was not an ardent evolutionist, but basically he accepted the ideas of evolution. And he did not have any understanding that he ought to read his Bible. All he knew to do was to try to go to a church, and he did know that he should pray, and so he began to speak with God on a daily basis. Then in God's goodness, while he was attending a conference at a university, he met a friend he had known many years previously. This man's name was Dennis. At that time, David was teaching part-time at Melbourne University, and Dennis was in charge of the subject that David taught. When David met him, Dennis mentioned that he was looking for people who wanted to do Bible study. David was amazed, and asked him why he wanted to do that. His friend explained how he had become a Christian a few months previously, and David told him that had happened to him as well. As they began to talk together about being Christians, David soon realised that his friend knew a lot more about what it meant to be a Christian than he did. So when Dennis asked him if he would like to do some Bible study with him, David was very eager and agreed. This resulted in their meeting together each week, and through these studies David's

friend helped him to understand what the Christian life was all about. In particular, he helped David to understand that what had happened to him was not unusual. It was not just something that was true for David. It was something that would be true for any person who trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ to forgive them their sins.

There were some considerable changes in David's life, now that he had become a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. One of the most obvious things was that God gave him a wonderful sense of peace. This brought a deep satisfaction to his heart so that he no longer needed to go around looking for thrills and entertainment. He had a tremendous joy just simply being with God's people and not having to go drinking or dancing, trying to have a good time, as he had done previously. He thoroughly enjoyed listening to the Bible, the Word of God, as it was explained each Sunday morning and evening in his church, and the whole orientation of his life began to change. It was the first time in his life that he really felt a peace and a joy and a contentment. It was something he had never known before. It was indeed the joy of the Lord's salvation.

Having been brought to this great blessing, David now longs that others should become Christian believers also. We need to become Christians because God has made us for himself. We are alienated from him; we are all sinners; we are all going our own way and God commands that we turn from going our own way and trust in him. David knows that it is only when we do this that we will find the real meaning of life. When we have turned to God

in repentance and placed our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, it is then that we find a joy and a peace that this world simply cannot give us. It is then we find that we are right with God and we know that we will one day be with him forever in heaven. This is something David is absolutely sure about because there are so many passages in the Bible which promise us that if we believe, we are going to be with the Lord Jesus Christ for ever.