

Chapter 4 What the Instruction actually says

You will have registered from my comments right at the beginning that, as I understand things, Abraham is a vital part of the story. Sometimes people think that I use his story as a kind of illustration or example. It certainly does work well that way but that's not quite what I had in mind. You see, Abraham is the beginning of the story of salvation, and the great promises of God about putting the whole world back on track start with him. In one sense, the story of the people of God starts with him. You just can't tell the story of salvation without him. Therefore, it's really important to understand who Abraham was when those promises were made.

Verses 1-12 It all begins with Abraham

This is one of the places where things get confused. I know exactly what I meant to say but I left it to Tertius, who was acting as scribe, to frame the sentence. Nobody used punctuation marks in letters in those days. When he read it back to me, it simply didn't occur to me, or to any of the rest of us, that it was ambiguous. What I meant to argue was almost the opposite of what often gets translated! I was not saying Abraham was our ancestor according to the flesh! I was asking if we should understand him as our ancestor in that way. I was trying to argue that Abraham is important, not because he is our physical ancestor (this would mean the passage applied only to Jews, and – conceivably – to other nations that trace their descent to him) but because he is our faith ancestor.

So, it would be better to translate the Greek here as 'What shall we say then? Have we found Abraham to be our forefather according to the flesh?' This is a rhetorical question framed to get the answer 'no'. The point of the argument is that Abraham offers an illustration of what I mean by faith, that is, he demonstrates an inward commitment to living in the way God intended. It was this utter trust that meant that he was in good standing with God. And this happened before Abraham took on any of the outward marks we now associate with the Instruction. The outward marks are often related to what I mean when I use the word 'flesh'.

My argument is that Abraham had no such outward marks to boast about. Rather, he trusted wholly in God and in God's promises and this was enough to bring him into a relationship with God and to live in the way God intended, the way that means that you will be vindicated in the judgement. It was nothing to do with outward marks and everything to do with inward commitment. It's underlined in the psalms. Surely, what David wrote applies to Abraham as much as to anyone, which means David's words could not be meant only for those who had been circumcised, because at this point in his story, Abraham was not circumcised!

I think the idea I'm striving for here is that you cannot really argue that Abraham was Jewish when he first received God's promises. The Instruction had yet to be given and he'd not been circumcised. On the other hand, you cannot really say he's a Gentile, a non-Jew, because the distinction didn't exist at this point. So, Abraham can work as a prototype for people of every kind, the Jewish people who are his physical descendants and the non-Jews who are not. This is because what truly matters is trust in God's promises, that is, being one of, what we might call, the spiritual descendants of Abraham.

You see the act of circumcision came after this. The faith comes first, and the circumcision is secondary. The latter seals the former. It depends on the former, not vice-versa. The faith, and the resulting relationship with God, happened before he took on the outward mark of being a male Jew. The upshot of all this is that he is the forefather of all the people of faith. This includes the non-Jews who are in relationship with God just as Abraham was, and it includes Jewish believers who share that faith.

1. I've already told you what I meant to say here. While Abraham is the physical ancestor of the Jews, this is not really what makes him significant. What matters is that he is the forerunner of all the people of faith.

2. It's not the outward manifestations of the Instruction that mean Abraham will be vindicated. If it were, he would have something he could brag about; it would be about him. It would be a matter of his accomplishments or his birth right. However, that's not the way it works and so he has nothing to boast about before God.

3. What the scripture in fact says, and I know I'm paraphrasing here but this is what it's getting at, is that Abraham trusted in God's promises, and this meant that he was treated as though he had started to live in the way that God had always – from the very beginning – intended that humans should live. In other words, his trust in God meant he would be vindicated.

4. Let's compare all this to our working lives. If you have a job, you do your work and in return you get paid. This is the pattern proposed by those who think that the outward manifestations of the Instruction are what bring vindication. Vindication would then not be something you receive as a gift from God but as something to which you are entitled.

5. On the other hand, the pattern I propose is that this is not something we work for; it is a gift from God. It is not the outward manifestations of the Instruction that count but the inward faith commitment. What matters is trust in God who will vindicate those who have not, up to that point, lived as God intended. Why? Because he treats their inward faith commitment as the sign that they will now live in the way that God had always intended.

6. David, writing in the psalms, speaks about this gift, this blessing of the one whom God treats as though they were living in the way he intended, on a basis other than the outward manifestations of the Instruction.

7. It's great to be among those who, although they have not lived in accordance with the Instruction, have been forgiven for that and for whom the consequences of failing to live as God intended have been dealt with.

8. This verse repeats the same thought using different words. How great to be a person whose failure to live as God intends is not counted against them by God.

9. Another rhetorical question for you to consider. David promised this and it's a blessing that fits Abraham's story and circumstances. But is it promised only to those who are circumcised, that is, to Jewish people, to those who know the Instruction? My answer is that Abraham got this blessing without any reference to his being Jewish. It was because of his inward commitment that he was dealt with by God as though he had started to live in the way that God intended.

10. I can imagine all kinds of objections that people might make to this line of argument. The best way to argue my case is through some more questions. The first concerns Abraham's identity at the time he received the promise. Who was Abraham when this happened? Was he circumcised at this point in the story? Was he Jewish at this point? Did he have the Instruction at this point? If you check the story, you'll see that it all happened before he received the mark of circumcision! In other words, the answer to the question posed in verse 9 is that the blessing is for both categories of people, Jews and non-Jews.

11. We must be careful not to put the cart before the horse. The important thing was that Abraham trusted God. The mark of circumcision came later. The mark was a sign of Abraham's trust in God's promises, his inward commitment to live in the way that God originally intended for humans – and that trust was there before he was circumcised. The point is that the outward is a mark of the inward and it is the inward that really counts. If the outward is there but the inward is not present, then the outward achieves nothing because it is then not a sign or a mark of anything. So, God's plan has two parts; the first concerns the non-Jews who have an inward trust in God; they are treated as though they have started to live in the way that God intended. Abraham is their father.

12. The second part concerns those in the Jewish group for whom the same thing is true. If they have faith like Abraham, then he is their father. The point is that this is something for the whole of humanity, not just one category.

Let me summarise what I've been trying to say. It links in with the points I was making in chapter 2 about the true purpose of circumcision and in chapter 3 about every category of humanity missing out on the glory of God. I am demonstrating that my teaching, far from undermining the Instruction as some allege, in fact upholds it. I've done this on the basis of a key story in the Instruction, the story that begins the whole process of salvation, the story of Abraham.

Remember, salvation means restoring humanity to the way of life God originally intended for them. The root of the problem was that humans rejected God's way of being human; they failed to trust God. In effect, by putting his trust in God and living as though God's promises are true, Abraham begins the process of turning things around. God promises to overlook Abraham's wrongdoing – for until this point he has lived in ways that do not conform to God's intended pattern – and to treat Abraham's trust as though it amounted to a life truly lived as God intended. On that basis God declares that Abraham will be vindicated at the last judgement. All this happens before Abraham is circumcised. There is no Jew and non-Jew at this point. Abraham can therefore be treated as the ancestor of all the people who trust God's promises whether or not they are Jewish, that is whether they bear the outward signs of the Instruction or not. Those outward signs are to be understood as marks of an inward trust in God and not vice versa.

There is a sense in which this is the beginning of the story of the people of God. The story of the covenant community that seeks to live as God originally intended starts with Abraham.

Verses 13–25 Creation from nothing and life from death

Now, the promises God makes to Abraham are vital. They provide the basic framework for understanding the way that God is at work in the world. However, there is a very significant mandate in the Bible that comes even earlier in the Instruction. This is big story stuff, so I'll leave the details for you to fill in. Remember, this is all about the right way to be human. That is, to be human in relationship with our creator.

The first humans were given a mandate, part of which was 'fill the earth'. In other words, the whole of the earth – potentially at least – belonged to them. As we have seen, humans went off track, but it was God's purpose to get them back on it. This is an instance of God's righteousness – his commitment to his original purposes for humanity and for the rest of creation. God intends to restore things. The story of that restoration begins with Abraham. God promises him several things, but they boil down to these two – that through him all the nations of the world will experience blessing, and that his descendant would inherit the earth.

Now I know that the word 'earth' is often translated 'land' and applied to the territory of Israel but that is not the way that I understand it. Or rather, I understand the land to represent the earth; the gift of the land in Israel's story is a kind of token – it's the first instalment of the rest of the planet. The way it fits into the story is that the promises to Abraham should be understood as a repetition of the original mandate to humanity. Abraham is the figure through whom the restoration of humanity begins. His descendant will inherit the earth. I need to be clear here about just who this descendant is. There are lots of promises in the psalms about the worldwide reign of the anointed King. I see these in terms of the same original mandate and the promise to Abraham. Of course, they were never fully fulfilled by any of Israel's or Judah's kings, but they are fulfilled in King Jesus who has been given exactly this authority. In other words, the mandate, the promises to Abraham and the words of the psalms, not to mention the prophets, all find their fulfilment in Jesus.

This is why I say that the promise to Abraham and his descendant is that he would inherit the world. And, once again, it is not through the Instruction that this promise is kept but through God's faithfulness. If inheritance were about the Instruction, particularly in its outward forms, then trust would not enter into it. If you understand it that way, you might as well write off the promise.

Here we come to another tricky idea that needs careful thought; you can't break a rule if you have no rules. People who don't have the Instruction cannot transgress, for transgression is the crossing of a known boundary, a bit like trespass. Of course, where you do have the Instruction, almost by definition you have transgression and transgressions have consequences. They provoke what I have been calling 'wrath', that is the thing that motivates judges to act.

Notice how Abraham's faith is effectively the reversal of the primal disobedience. This points forward to a greater obedience to come.

So, it doesn't rest on rules because that could result in the promises not being delivered. Instead, it is based on relationships of trust so that the fulfilment of the promise can be a matter of grace and so there is a cast iron guarantee, not just to the people of the Instruction but to everyone of whatever background who trusts God as Abraham did, for he's the father – the prototype – of us all, the father of many nations.

Let me say something about the kind of faith Abraham had; he believed in the God who gives life to the dead, the God who makes something out of nothing. He had nothing other than trust in God to make him believe that God's promises could come true: he was an old man, his wife was an old woman; she was, to the best of his knowledge, barren. Yet he lived his life as though the promises were true. That's the kind of trusting faith that brings us into relationship with God and starts us out living in the way God originally intended. It was his and it's ours too; it belongs to those who believe in the resurrection of Jesus who was handed over for the times we've crossed the wrong line and who was raised to life to bring us into relationship with God and to get us vindicated in the judgement.

So, that's the big story; God has kept his ancient promises. He has done it in a way I had not expected; that is, he has not done it through the Instruction, though his method was perfectly consistent with what the Instruction actually teaches.

You will have noticed that I hurried over a couple of things. There have been references to Adam, for example and hints of what Jesus accomplished. There have also been questions about ethics. These are among the things I plan to spell out in the next few chapters.

13. The promise to Abraham is a kind of reformulation of the original mandate and promise given to humanity. Abraham stands in the place of Adam as the one whose descendant will inherit the world. King Jesus is this descendant. This promise to Abraham precedes the giving of the Instruction. It did not come about because of Abraham's commitment to the Instruction or its outward manifestations, it came about because of God's commitment to his original purposes. Abraham trusted in these things.

14. If it were simply a question of having the Instruction that made a person heir of the promises, in other words, if simply being Jewish were sufficient, it would mean that none of the inward commitment mattered or counted for anything. The promises would count for nothing. To put it another way, if it were about the Instruction then there could never be any blessing for those who do not possess that Instruction. Yet God has promised that all the nations – those with and those without the Instruction – will be blessed. If you make it about the Instruction, you make the promise void.

15. I think this is one of those places where the line of thought we were pursuing when the letter was written got a bit dense. Let me try to explain. If you don't have the Instruction, you cannot really break the Instruction. A transgression is the crossing of a known line. If there's no line, there's nothing to transgress. You may be failing to live as God intended and you may be aware of it, but you're not actually breaking any rules that you know about.

Now, let's deal with the issue of 'wrath'. Remember that this is the word I use for the thing that motivates a judge to act in judgement. If you have an Instruction and someone transgresses, there must be consequences. Wrath is the characteristic of God that motivates him to enforce those consequences. Basically, no Instruction, then no transgression and if there's no transgression, there's no wrath. So, in a sense, the Instruction brings wrath.

16. The Instruction is therefore tainted by wrath. I shall say more about this later. For now, it's sufficient to argue that, because of its link to wrath, the Instruction was not an

appropriate vehicle for bringing about God's promises. So, God acted because of his own faithfulness. This means that God's promise-keeping rests on his sheer generosity and is guaranteed to all Abraham's spiritual descendants, whether they bear the outward marks of the Instruction or not.

17. One of the promises that God makes to Abraham was that he would be the ancestor of many peoples. Therefore, Abraham should not be understood as the father of the Jews alone. They may be (among) his physical descendants but his spiritual descendants – and that's the kind of descent that really matters – can be from any nation at all. The God who made this promise is utterly reliable. He is the one in whom Abraham trusted. This God gives life to the dead and creates things out of nothing.

18. Abraham had quite a story. God offered him these promises and, even when it looked for all the world as though they could not possibly happen, Abraham continued to live as though those promises would come true. He had been told about his descendants and he trusted it would be so.

19. Humanly speaking, there were things that made the promises hard to believe. There was his own body, for he was an old man by this time, and there was his wife Sarah, who everyone thought was unable to conceive. Yet these things did not stop him trusting.

20. Abraham got on with life trusting that God would bring about the things he had promised. As a result, he trusted more and more and his life gave glory to God, which is to say – remember Psalm 8 – that he showed, in part at least, the results of what happens when you live in the way that God had intended that humans should live.

21. I think this is clear enough. Abraham was convinced that he could rely on God to deliver on his promises.

22. My argument should now be clear. Abraham relied on God and God treated that trust as meaning that Abraham was living in the way that God intended humans to live.

23. This willingness of God to treat him as though he were living in the way God intended does not apply to Abraham alone.

24. It also applies to us. Those of us who trust in the God who brings life to the dead and things out of nothing, who raised King Jesus, are also treated as though we are living life in the way God intended.

25. This Jesus was handed over to death on account of our wrongdoing and was raised to life so that we might live as God intended, that is, live in such a way that God will find in our favour at the judgement.

The idea is that God intended humans to live in a certain way. This was a fundamental part of God's intention for creation. One result of this way of living would be that humans would give glory to God. This is because God's true, original purposes for the whole creation would be being fulfilled. As we saw, humans rejected this way of being, but God wasn't prepared to abandon his project. He planned a way to bring salvation, which is to say, to restore humans to the way of life he'd originally envisaged, and so renew the whole of creation. The story of this process begins with Abraham. Where other humans failed to

trust God, Abraham believed in God's promises. Because of this trust, he could be treated by God as though he was living as God intended, with the consequences of his previous failure to live that way being forgiven. Abraham's faith is parallel to the faith of those who follow King Jesus. There is slightly more to it than I have implied. I have said that Abraham can be treated as though he is living as God originally intended. In fact, his trust in God means he can start to do just that. That's why I can say that he gave glory to God. This is certainly also true, as I'll explain later, of those who follow King Jesus.