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Why Is Abraham Considered a Great Man of Faith When He Had so Much Evidence?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about why Abraham is considered to be a great man of faith when God gave him so much evidence of his existence and a response to the idea that a person's salvation is questionable because his faith is "all head and little heart."

* Since God appeared to Abraham several times, it seems he had more evidence than most to trust God, so why is he considered to be a great man of faith?

* What do you think about people questioning my salvation because my faith seems to them to be "all head and little heart"?

Transcript

[MUSIC PLAYING] I'm Amy Hall, and you're listening to Stand to Reasons, hashtag #STRAskPodcast. With me is Greg Cogle. Hello, Greg.

Hi, Amos. OK, let's start with a question from C. Cooper. God appeared/spoke to Abraham eight times.

It seems like he had more evidence than most to trust God. Why is he held as a great man of faith? That's a very curious question, but it's also very revealing. And what it reveals is the-- I'm not condescending here at all, but I'm making an observation that's very important.

So I'm going to offer a correction. What it reveals is that a person believes that faith is what you exercise in the absence of evidence. The less evidence you have, the more faith you can have.

Now, how this plays out in the question is, well, look at Abraham had lots of evidence. So how could he be said to have lots of faith? Be a man of faith, great faith, too, because when you have more evidence than you're exercising less faith. Now, this takes the view of faith.

That faith is more a leap. And you're not leaping when you're seeing clearly. You're not leaping into the dark, into the unknown, just hoping that it's going to be so, which is the way a lot of people understand faith.

OK, but this is not the biblical understanding of faith. Look at the apostles. Did they exercise faith? They had so much faith they were willing to die for their convictions.

But they saw miracle after miracle after, for goodness sake, you think Abraham saw a lot. Look at the disciples, three and a half years, being with God every day. Flesh and bones, God.

Teaching, acting, healing, casting out demons, raising the dead. And by the way, this is why Jesus abraded Thomas at the end of the Gospel of John, who demanded that he put his finger in the wounds of Jesus before he would acknowledge that Jesus rose from the dead. Why the challenge? Because he had every reason to believe that the resurrection would happen.

Jesus had been talking about it. And all the other disciples, the other 10, had told them, we have seen Jesus. We've seen the Lord.

He rose from the dead. They saw the empty tomb. They visited, ate with Jesus, talked with him.

Rode to Emmaus, all of that. Thomas says, nope, I'm not going to believe until I stick my finger on all that. And she says, well, you know, this is a bit much.

Okay. So the concept of faith is not a willingness to believe something you have no reason to believe. And that's really fabulous.

And incidentally, if that's where biblical faith was, the person who has the most faith would be the person who continued to believe in Jesus, even if they actually literally in fact found his bones in the grave. In other words, that is a belief totally in the teeth of all the evidence. Oh, what a great man of faith.

No, that's the person of stupidity. And Paul himself says in first Corinthians 15, if Jesus has not been raised, people should feel sorry for us because we have believed that he was and he wasn't. That's pitiful.

We are most men to be pitied with his precise words. So what faith turns out to be is trust. Trust, that's what pesto means.

Active trust, all right? Now we trust for reasons. And the more reasons we have, the easier it is to trust. This is one of the reasons we have standard reason.

Confidence for every Christian. Courage for-- let's see, how's it go? Confident, and I feel like an idiot. Excuse me, confidence for every Christian.

Clear thinking for every challenge and courage and grace for every encounter. OK, we know that if we build the confidence by giving the reasons, then people will have the courage to stand tall. Duh, of course.

So that's why the information matters. I'm very happy that C. Cooper asked the question. And I hope when they listen to this, whoever she is, doesn't take umbrage at my response.

But this reflects an unsound and unbiblical understanding of faith. And I'm glad to have the opportunity to clarify. It's also probably the most popular understanding people have of this word, which I don't know how that happened exactly because it is not supported by the Bible.

But somewhere along the line, people started using it to mean a blind leap. But if you look at Hebrews 11 and you look at all the people that are commended there for being people of faith and you look at what they had faith in, what you see is that they were trusting in promises that they could not yet see the fulfillment of. So they were trusting God when he said, Abraham, here are your promises.

Abraham trusted him. Abraham had faith. He had faith that God would fulfill his promise that Isaac would be born.

He had faith that all these other promises God made to him would be fulfilled. And he never saw the fulfillment of a lot of those promises. And so Hebrews 11 goes through all these different people who by faith acted on belief in God's promise to them, something that would be fulfilled in the future.

So when it's something that's unseen that they have faith and it's something that has a future fulfillment. And they're trusting based on knowing who God is and on God revealing himself. And in the case of Abraham revealed himself many times in a very concrete way so that Abraham could trust in God's promises.

But as you mentioned Greg, just because you see God, look at all the people around Jesus, that doesn't mean you're going to trust what he has said. And you're gonna put your life in his hands and your soul in his hands. Not everyone does that.

Now that's not rational, but because we're sinful people, we don't trust God. Ultimately I think. - I like the way you're using the concept of sight there, what we don't see because this is something that's also misunderstood.

We don't see with the eyes. This is what Amy is referring to. Abraham couldn't see the long-term ultimate fulfillment.

He couldn't see with his eyes. He rather knew the promise of God entrusted in it. So when Paul and 2 Corinthians, I think, talking about heaven says we're here and not

there, he said we live by faith and not by sight.

He's not saying we live by faith, but not by evidence or reasons or rationale or justification. That's the way people talk, we live by faith, but not by fight. He's saying we don't see it.

We are not in heaven seeing heaven right now. It is something in the future that we're trusting God for. All right, and so when Jesus says to Thomas, blessed are those who have believed and haven't seen, he's not saying blessed are those who believe, who have no good reason to believe.

Thomas had plenty of good reason to believe. He was demanding to see Jesus in a very dramatic way. That was what he was demanding.

And Jesus was saying blessed are those who have not eyeballed me, but still are trusting me. The trusting is for reason. In fact, it's in the very next verse in John.

Many other signs, very next verse. Many other signs and wonders Jesus performed, John writes, signs and wonders, miracles. He did lots and lots of miracles.

They'd fill all the books of the world. He said hyperbolically at the end of the chapter. Many other things, but I only included these seven, but these things I have written so that you will believe that what Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah and the Son of God, divinity, and in believing have life in his name.

So these references to sight are not referring to evidences. They are referring to sight. - And if you look at the pattern of God working throughout the Bible, not just in the New Testament with Jesus, but the major event of the Old Testament, you look at the Exodus and what does God keep saying over and over? - I'm doing this so that they may know that I'm God.

He was giving dramatic evidences to the people of Egypt and ultimately to the world that he existed and that he was sovereign, that he was good and powerful, that he was the God of the Jews, all of these things, he was giving evidence. And that was supposed to sustain their trust that he would fulfill his promises to bring them to the promised land. - You know, it's funny you said, say that and to the world because I just started reading 1 Samuel and after the first few chapters, you have this historical stuff happening with the nation of Israel and the Ark has been, the Ark has been brought into the battle, okay? And the people say, how are we going to sustain or so? How are we going to be victorious against the presence of this God, the same God who destroyed the Egyptians, all right? This is what you're referring to, you know, to the world.

- This happened 500 years, 500 years before these events, or so, at least 400, think 400 years back. America was just being founded. It wasn't even a country 400 years ago.

This is 17th century. That's how long ago God had done these things. They are still remembering, okay? Now it turned out they won the battle because they said, take courage men, let's fight.

And then because of the Jews, unfaithfulness, God allowed the enemy to be victorious. But it's interesting they still remembered this. This resonated down through history.

- It was because God gave evidence that then they could say, if God said he's going to take this land, we're in trouble. - Even the pagans could say that. - Yes, yeah.

And I also want to say, why is Abraham commended? Well, faith is not easy. Trusting in God for things that he has promised, that we don't yet see the fulfillment of, is not an easy thing. And I just want to read, just as a reminder, what was Abraham trusting? And this comes from Romans 4. He says, he talks about Abraham, that those who have faith are the children of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, a father of many nations I've made you, in the presence of him whom he believed, even God who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.

In hope against hope, he, that is Abraham, Abraham believed so that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, so shall your descendants be. Without becoming weak in faith, he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about 100 years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb. Yet with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God and being fully assured that what God had promised, he was able also to perform.

So here Abraham is trusting, that God was gonna give him a son because he promised. - That's right. - That's a huge deal.

- And regardless of the physical circumstances of Abraham's life. - Right, so Abraham had a lot of faith, he was trusting God, he was rightly trusting God, he was rightly believing God's promises, and not all of us have that kind of faith for sure. - Incidentally, it is not unusual for Christians to have dramatic, powerful experiences with the true God, that in a certain sense ought to verify God's existence without question that end up doubting.

And if I want a biblical example, look at John the Baptist. When he was in prison, he says, "Are you the one?" If you recall, in the early part of the Gospels, I think it's John, he had a sign that was given to him by the father of who Jesus would be, and that would be at the baptism, there would be the dove, and you're my beloved son, in whom I'm well pleased, will that happen? And he knew it. But now things weren't going the way expected, and that's why he says, he sends his friends, and he says, "To Jesus, are you the one?" So here's a guy who had very dramatic things take place.

Now, he wasn't living miracles all the time, but he was born of a miracle, I mean, and his father prophesied over him, and he leapt in his mother's womb in the presence of Jesus the Zygote in Mary, and they must have had contact as they're growing up, they're cousins, kind of thing, or second cousins, whatever. Yet, and then having this dramatic characterization, behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, I didn't know he was the Lamb of God until the baptism, and then that's what the God showed me without question, but now he's saying, "Are you the one? Are you?" So it's very human, even when people have dramatic characterizations of the presence of God in their life, very dramatic presentation, undeniable, and they still can falter into doubt, very understandable. - Just the nature of being a fallen human, being separated from God.

And this kind of leads into our next question. This one comes from Chris. "I've been told my faith seems all head and little heart.

When asked if I feel the presence of God, my reply of, "What do you mean by that?" Suggests them, "I don't." Then they question, "If I am truly a Christian, if I've never felt his presence." - Well, this conversation actually came up with my brother and I last night. My brother became a Christian, was it last, yesterday afternoon. My brother became a Christian before I did, and I'm 48 years a believer.

He was a pastor for 35 years. And so we were talking about this very thing. And by the way, the concept of the hiddenness of God is one that has been talked about for centuries.

The idea of that, God is not consciously, immediately present to ourselves frequently or all the time in our lives. Sometimes it did not for a long time. Actually, Lewis wrote about this in a sense through Aslan.

You know, people believed in Aslan and they were trying to be faithful to Aslan, but he hadn't been around for a while when you look at different books and different circumstances. And then he shows up when it's absolutely necessary and then you know he has had not been away actually, in fact, at all. He just had not been visible.

And I have struggled with this myself. I don't know where people get this criterion 'cause I don't think it's biblical. Now that we have, there are affect developments of our relationship with God is absolutely true.

Our spirit cries out, "Abba Father, Romans 8." You know, like we have a sense of this. But it isn't as if, it's certainly not in my life, apparently not in my brother's life. And a lot of other people, you know, I've had disciples that have told me, you know, in the time I really feel touched by God directly, powerfully, is actually kind of rare.

And some have said, and I think I read this from some saint, the older I get in the Lord,

the more distant he seems to me, experientially. So it'd be interesting to talk to people who others really admire as being productive servants of God, people they look up to as spiritual leaders and ask them about the nature of their interior life. This is something we have to work at.

I have talked about this before on the air that sometimes it's a matter of disposition, Amy. Some people are just kind of more like that. And others are less like that, some right brain left, you know, you're in your head, not in your heart.

I don't know people have choice about that, frankly. I think we're just different. And I don't think that if somebody's always kind of, um, um, holy rolling and the holy ghost, emotionally, if that makes them any more spiritual than the person who is in the slew of despond to sight Bunyan now.

In fact, if you look at this incredible ancient classic Pilgrims progress, there are lots of circumstances like that in the life of the pilgrim that's being described as a reason why this book, um, I mean, maybe with J.K. Rowling aside for the moment is the best-selling book in history saved for the Bible because it has served purposes, people's needs so well describing the reality of genuine Christianity. So I think, uh, I completely understand people's expectation, desire to want to be emotionally close to God. It's a desire I have to.

And I do feel that on occasion. I don't think that this is what we are to expect on a regular basis in this life. - I think, I think you're right, Greg, that a lot of this has to do with different personalities.

People, so maybe what you can do is look at how your other relationships are and just, you might not be an emotionally demonstrative person. There's a range of people. And so Chris, I think there could be a genuine confusion about what people mean when they say, let's see, what exactly did they say to them? - In your head and not in your heart.

- Yeah, or asking if he fills the presence of God because that's kind of a, a biguous, you know, it's not really clear what they mean by that. And so I think it's completely legitimate for you to ask, what is it that you mean by that? And I suspect a lot of times what people mean is they're experiencing emotions of love and desire for God and enjoyment of God. And if you're not a person who is inclined to that kind of emotional interactions with people, then you might not feel that and that's okay.

But there are also certain things that we can do to foster a relationship with God, whether or not those emotions come. You can make a space for that by spending time in prayer, in worship, in fellowship with other believers. You're putting yourself in a position where God does work, not always through emotions, but you are putting yourself in that position if that's what you are seeking.

But rather than seeking that, I think what we should be seeking is to know God and to trust Him. And the emotions come and go because we are human beings and we're fallen and we don't always respond emotionally the way we should or it should might not even be part of this. There are certain things that we're seeking to do.

We're seeking to know, to love, to be obedient, to trust. And however God works in us emotionally, and I think it's different ways in different people, then that's what He does. - Right.

- You know Greg, oh go ahead. - One of those things, you mentioned worship and one of those things that is meant, designed to stir the emotion is music. And so I find that I have more of those feelings when I am worshiping with the body of Christ, but also by myself, when the music and the lyrics are Christo or Theocentric.

If I'm just trying to recite my emotions, oh joy and everything's, you know, a lot of these songs that people sing are reporting emotions that people don't have. And I'm suspicious that they are, the worship leaders are doing that in order to get people to feel the emotions they're singing about and rather having the emotions be in genuine responses to truths that we're singing about in God. And that's why I prefer older songs usually because they are more Christocentric or Theocentric.

They're about Jesus or about God, they're not about me. I don't wanna sing about my feelings because I'm not always bringing good feelings to church when I'm there, but the music, and even in my times with the Lord, I do have a little hymnal thing. I want to go back to the Jesus movement.

These are really fabulous songs and they're simple and a lot of them are just passages put to music and I find myself being moved by doing that in a way of preparing me for interaction, communication with God. - You know, Greg, it's funny you say that because when I think about the music back in the 70s and 80s that we used to sing in church, the only ones I remember now, I mean, maybe a couple of exceptions, are the ones that were actual passages in the Bible which is, I didn't realize this until recently that all, you know, I would sing through them in my mind, they would come to mind and they were all actual verses from the Bible that had been put to music. - Yeah, create in me a clean heart, oh God, that's Psalm 51.

I know all these verses because I sung it and I know that chunk of Psalm 51 in virtue of the song and renew a right spirit within me. And it's, so this is something, for example, that we can sing that song and make it our own. We can be singing this verse and we're saying, "God, make in me a clean heart." And so it makes it, those kinds of songs make it so much more personal and real and I can engage it and connect with that music better emotionally.

- And I have one other suggestion. This is something I've recently discovered and I've

been using for about a month now. It's a book called Be Thou My Vision and all it is, it's like a liturgy for daily worship and it just takes you through a call to worship, praise and adoration and confession and assurance of pardon, all these different things and there's passages and there's prayers from great Christians throughout history.

There's a creed, there's a place for intercession. So what it does is it guides your prayer time and your worship time through all different aspects of God. So it's not only about our intercession for others, but it's also about praise.

So you're seeing who God is, you're seeing these prayers written by people who were deeply, what's the word I'm looking for? They were, they were, they were in God's word. They knew theology and so there's these deep prayers and you can pray them and then you can add your own prayers and it just guides you to have a more rounded view of worshiping God of what? - Robust. - Yes.

- By the way, the Be Thou My Vision, many probably know this, this is actually the title of a wonderful hymn and it is an appeal to be close to God and to let God be everything in their life. You be My Vision, God, You be My portion. - And sometimes we need some help in guiding us to thinking about God in a worshipful way and learning from others in the past and doing things in a way that they've found to be helpful, that sometimes that's helpful if you want to foster that relationship with God in more of an emotional relationship.

Well, thank you so much for your questions. We're out of time, but thank you C. Cooper and thank you Chris. Please send us your questions on Twitter with the hashtag #STRAsk.

We look forward to hearing from you. This is Amy Hall and Greg Kogel for Stand to Reason. (bell rings)

(upbeat music)

(upbeat music)

(upbeat music)

(upbeat music)