

What Does it Mean to be Christian?

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening everyone. It's great to see you here. As has already been said, my name is Alistair and let me add my welcome to Neil's. To begin this evening, I want to ask you one question.

Who do you think the most quizzed people in the UK are? Who are the people who get asked questions most in any given day? Well, in 2013, The Telegraph wrote an article based, and they based the study on that very question.

Who are the most quizzed people on the UK in subjects far and wide? And the answer to that question is mothers. There we go. Mothers.

And the article says this. From breakfast at 7.19am to tea time at 7.59pm, the average mother faces a testing 12.5 hour day of questioning.

Working out at one question every 2 minutes and 36 seconds. So on average, a mother is asked 23 questions an hour.

[1 : 08] So to put that into a little bit of context, a teacher is asked roughly 19 questions an hour. A doctor, roughly 18. And a waiter or waitress, roughly 13 questions an hour.

So mothers, you are in the lead with a whopping 287 questions a day. And I thought being asked three questions in three hours in an exam paper was tough.

Never mind 23 questions per hour on almost any topic under the sun. So if you are a mother, or if you're an auntie, or if you're an uncle, or a Sunday school teacher, or if you've spent any time with children at all, you will know that they love to ask questions.

Children ask so many questions, but the question that many of us hear will want to hear children ask. Well, the question that we pray that children in this church would ask one day is, who is a Christian?

I know for my goddaughters, the question I want them to ask above all is, what does it mean to be a Christian? And secondly, how can I become a Christian?

[2 : 18] Those are the two most important questions that I want children to ask. And our passage this evening in Genesis gives us a good understanding of what it means to be a Christian. And so that's the question I want us to have in the back of our minds this evening.

What does it mean to be a Christian? I think Genesis 12 gives us two explanations of what it means to be a Christian. I've worked really, really hard on this outline.

So hopefully I'll be able to call you on Friday morning and you'll remember it. So there are two things. The first is that we are to trust God and obey him. And the second one is we are to continue to trust God and obey him.

So you have one point to remember. So it's not that difficult. But we hope this new sermon series on the life of Abraham will, yes, help us understand the Old Testament better. But we also hope that it will be very practical.

That will help us wrestle with our faith and how we live our faith out in everyday life. And one of the things we will see in this whole series is that whilst Abraham is seen as the father of our faith, whilst he is called in the Bible a friend of God, we will see that he is an imperfect man who makes mistakes.

[3 : 34] We'll see that like everybody else in this world, Abraham falls short and doesn't meet God's standards of perfection. But God still used him mightily despite his failings.

Many of us have heard of Abraham before, and that's the name that he's referred to most in the Bible. But in Genesis chapter 12, he's called Abram. But so that I don't trip over his name every single time I say it and so that we all can follow along, I'm just going to call him Abraham.

Now, it's the same person, but yeah, it's just a different name. So let's see what Abraham can teach us about what it means to be a Christian. But first of all, we're breaking into Genesis in chapter 12. So we need to understand what's happened thus far in the book of Genesis. So Genesis 1 and 2 opens with the amazing account of God creating the world, where God powerfully speaks this world into being and everything is good.

Humanity is created as the pinnacle of creation. God looks at Adam and Eve and declares that all is very good. Adam and Eve live in perfect harmony with God.

[4 : 45] But then in Genesis 3, we see a shift. Adam and Eve decide that they no longer want to be under God's rule, and they disobey him and sin enters the world.

Humanity is corrupt. The world is cursed as a result. God's wonderful creation is now damaged because of sin.

And then in Genesis 3, verse 15, we see hope. We see a promise, a promise of a person who will one day defeat sin and defeat Satan. But sadly, this promise is followed by a downward spiral of mankind.

We see murder. We see people with multiple wives. We see the world become so evil that God sends a flood. But even after the flood, when mankind was given a second chance, they still go back to their old ways.

And then things go from bad to worse. And in chapter 11 of Genesis, we see the people are so bad. They are so against God that God disperses them all over the world.

[5 : 54] And then in the end of Genesis 11, we read about this man, Abraham. And the question that people would have been thinking is, is this the promised one? Is this the one who Genesis 3, verse 15 says will come and defeat sin and restore humanity to God?

Well, we will see that Abraham is not perfect. And over this series, we'll see that his faith is real. That his God is amazing, is marvelous.

But we will also see that he is human. Abraham's faith waxes and wanes, but despite his failing. And the big line that runs through this whole series is that God is faithful.

And so keep this question in the back of your minds as we look at Genesis 12. What does it mean to be a Christian? Well, the first thing it means is to trust God and obey. To trust God and obey.

In the first verse of Genesis 12, we see something amazing about the character of God. In his sovereignty, he chooses to speak to Abraham. This is the God who created the world by speaking.

[7 : 03] This is the God who made the stars from nothing. Who created Adam from dust. And now we see him speaking to Abraham. We see this almighty and powerful God.

This infinite God speaking to a finite fallen man. Not because Abraham deserved the honor of hearing God's voice. But because God is gracious.

And God in his gracious greatness has revealed himself to each and every one of us this evening. The Bible is God's revelation of who he is, who we are, and how he has made it possible for our problem of sin, of wrongdoing to be fixed.

God has spoken to us through his word. The Bible isn't a book full of nice stories to make us feel good. It's not a book of stories to make us feel happy.

But the Bible are the words of God, which were written so that we could know God. So that we could know what we were created for. So that we could live in harmony with God and praise him and enjoy him forever.

[8 : 14] Think about the promises that God speaks to Abraham in verses 2 and 3 of Genesis 12. God holds him to leave his father's house. To go to a land that he would show him.

And God will make Abraham's descendants into a great nation. God will make Abraham a blessing to the whole world. And those who bless Abraham will be blessed. And those who curse him will be cursed.

Now these are amazing promises, but they require two things. They require trust. And they require obedience. You see, Abraham was told to go to a land that God would show him.

But he didn't actually know where that land was. He didn't know where he was going. He didn't know if he'd be able to provide for his family. He was told he would be away from the security of his father's household.

Away from the security of a community who knew him and who would care for him if he needed it. And so you can imagine the scene. Abraham is packing to leave. The whole contents of his house are on the street.

[9 : 18] His wife and himself are getting ready. People are packing the camels and the donkeys. They're all ready to leave. And then a neighbor spots them. And shouts over, Abraham, what are you doing?

People don't do that. People don't leave. And he responds, well, I'm going. Why? Well, because God has told me. Well, where are you going? I don't know where I'm going. But all I know is that the Lord has spoken to me and he has revealed himself. And he has promised wonderful things to me. And I must trust in God's goodness. And I must obey. See, Abraham needed to trust God because he didn't own any land. He was 75 and he didn't have any children. And yet he was to be the father of a great nation. I think that requires a little bit of trust. But still in verse 4, we read that so Abraham went as the Lord told him.

[10 : 16] Now, because people move around today, I don't think we realize just how difficult this would have actually been. It was quite normal and almost expected that people would have stayed as one family unit.

And if they moved, they would have moved together with parents, grandparents, grandchildren, children, everyone in one household. So it's not like today where we can have family members all over the world.

I have family members in four different countries across the world. And it's quite normal for today. But not in Abraham's day. And nevertheless, he trusts God and goes where he tells him. But just because Abraham trusted God and obeyed did not mean that life would be easy from there on out. See, we get a seemingly small detail as Abraham arrives in the promised land in verse 6, where you see that it says, At that time, the Canaanites were in the land.

Right at the beginning of this family who would become the nation of Israel, right at the beginning of the outset of God's plan for the people, we see the Canaanites.

[11 : 26] A people who would later lead Israel astray. A people who would bring trouble on Israel. And we see them right here at the start as Abraham arrives in the land.

But God says, don't worry about them. Focus on me. And he reveals himself to Abraham and says, This is the land that will be for you and your descendants.

And instead of objecting or questioning God and saying, Well, God, how exactly is this all going to work out? Abraham worshipped God. Abraham worshipped God because of these promises. And we can worship God today because we have seen these promises fulfilled. We have seen Abraham's offspring and how it has been a blessing to the whole world.

How? Well, if you look in your own time at Matthew chapter 1, you can see Abraham's descendants written down. And the promise in Genesis chapter 3 verse 15, the promise of hope, and the promise here in Genesis 12 verse 3, of the seed who would be a blessing to the whole world, we see that that descendant, that seed, is Jesus Christ.

[12 : 40] See, these promises are not just for Abraham, nor are they just relevant for the people of Israel. But these promises are of huge significance for Christianity because all of these promises point forward to the one who would end the world's biggest problem, the problem of our sin and the problem of our separation from God.

Jesus, God's own son, came into the world, lived a life of perfect obedience, a life that we could never live, which led him to the point of being nailed to a cross so that we could be forgiven and restored to God, that we could be in a right relationship with him.

That is why these promises are fundamental to the Christian faith and such an important part of the Old Testament. Abraham trusted God and obeyed him.

So let me ask us this evening, are we trusting God and are we obeying him? God has revealed himself to us in his word. And as Christians, as has already been said this evening, we are called to be different, to live lives that are distinct for God's glory.

And that requires us trusting God and obeying him. And one of the things that brings me comfort in this ever-changing world that we live in is that God is the same yesterday, today and forever.

[14 : 08] God isn't going to change his mind on something tomorrow. He isn't going to suddenly decide that he was wrong. We will never be able to understand God, but he calls us to trust in him, to trust in his sovereign plan and to trust our lives in his hands and to obey him.

Now the obedience that I'm referring to is not the kind of obedience that we see in a toddler when their parent tells them to clean up their toys in a huff, nor is it the obedience of an employee who's

asked to do a boring and tedious job by their boss.

But the obedience that the life of Abraham is calling us to have is one of joyfully and willingly submitting to God, not because he is a cruel taskmaster, not because we fear his reaction if we do not obey, but we trust and obey God because we know that he loves us.

Maybe you've never thought of it that way before. Maybe you've always seen God as this big man in the sky with a stick who will punish those who don't obey him. Or maybe you've seen the Bible as a rule book that people follow so that they can be right in God's eyes.

Well, I want you to know this evening that God is a loving father and he wants us to hear him speaking in the Bible. He wants us to trust and obey him because he loves us and wants the best for us.

[15:34] There is no better way to live than in line with what our creator has made us for. Now, this doesn't mean life is going to be easy. There will be a cost and there is a cost to being a Christian.

You see, Abraham left his family behind. He went to an unknown future, to a distant land, but God was in control. And that truth is still the same today.

God has not changed. God sees everything. God cares and God loves. And if we trust and obey God, we'll be living in line with the will of our loving father.

And so the example that Abraham shows us of what it means to be a Christian is to trust and obey God, even when life is tough. And the second thing that this text teaches us about what it means to be a Christian is that we should continue to trust God and obey him.

Now, this is where we see the first failings of Abraham, the first lack of faith. We have an example which shows us that he, like us, is imperfect.

[16:47] See, the Bible has so many stories which show negative things that the people of God have done. And we shouldn't skim over them with embarrassment, but we should learn them.

We should learn from them. And we should not follow in their footsteps because we don't want to make the same mistakes. We see two things which show us that Abraham is an imperfect human being.

And the first thing to notice is in verse 10 of chapter 12. There was a famine in the land and Abraham left and went to Egypt for a while. Now, you might be thinking, well, it isn't wrong for somebody to act when things don't seem to be going their way.

It isn't wrong for someone to move so that they can provide for their families. Now, if you're thinking those things, absolutely agree with you. The application of this passage is not if you are hungry to sit at home and not do anything.

It's not to sit at home and pray harder. But this detail is neither condemned nor condoned in the Bible. It's just simply stated that Abraham went to Egypt.

[17:54] But I think this detail should make us stop and think. And we should be thinking, is this really the right thing to do, Abraham? Is it really right for you to leave the land that God has promised to you?

See, there are two extremes when it comes to things like this. We can either run straight ahead without thinking and without praying, or we can sit and do absolutely nothing and say that God will fix everything for us.

Those are two extremes. And both of these extremes can be harmful. Now, I'm sure you've heard the illustration before of a man trapped on the roof during a flood.

And as the floodwaters rise, he's praying, God, will you save me? And a lifeboat goes past and shouts to him, come on, get in, I'm here to save you. And he flags it past, saying, no, don't worry. God's got me, I'm fine, God will save me. And they go on. And then a helicopter comes and he says, no, don't worry, God will save me. I've got it, God's got it all sorted. And then when the flood rises and the man dies, he goes to heaven and he stands before God and says, God, why didn't you save me?

[19:05] I called to you and God says, well, I sent you a lifeboat and I sent you a helicopter, but you didn't get on either of them. Or you think about the other extreme of a person who maybe hears a sermon about encouraging Christians to consider overseas mission.

And the first thing they do is they go home, they book flights and they move to a distant country. But they haven't prayed. They haven't asked godly Christians what they think.

And they maybe didn't use their God-given discernment. And after a few months, they return from their mission trip, hurt and discouraged because it didn't work out. Now, I don't think that the

application of this passage is to rush to either of these two extremes, but rather to use our minds and to continue to trust and obey God.

So practically, when it comes to decisions, ask yourself two questions. What does the Bible say about this? And what do godly men and women say about this? See, the Bible is God's word recorded for us so that we can know him.

And it speaks into so many areas of our lives, but obviously there are areas that it doesn't speak into. The Bible doesn't tell me which job to take, which house to buy, which school to send my kids to.

[20 : 24] And that's why it's important to speak to godly men and women. People who will pray through decisions with you. People who will give you godly advice as you wrestle with a decision.

People who care about you and who care about God's glory and how to glorify him in all things. And so Abraham leaves the land that God has promised to him, which should be an indication to us that this might not be the best thing for him.

And then we see the second thing is that as Abraham and Sarah were journeying to Egypt, he turns to his wife and says, would you lie for me? Would you say that you're my sister?

See, Abraham was afraid that Pharaoh would see how beautiful Sarah was and that Pharaoh would kill Abraham so that he could take Sarah to be his own wife.

And so he asked his wife to lie because she was beautiful. Abraham was relying on himself. He used deception for his own safety and didn't consider that if the Pharaoh did find Sarah to be attractive, that he might actually lose his wife.

[21 : 35] Abraham wasn't relying on God or on God's promises to him, but instead he used deception to gain safe passage into Egypt. So not only was Abraham sinning because he was lying, but he was encouraging sin in his family because he was asking his wife to lie.

Abraham was doubting God. And they arrive in Egypt and Pharaoh took Sarah into the palace and he gave Abraham sheep, cattle, donkeys, servants and camels.

All the things that one king would give to another for a political agreement. And so in a sense, Abraham's bank account was full, but he was missing his wife.

And despite all of this, despite the confusion, the lies, the deception, the complications that now tie this family up, God steps in and intervenes in a supernatural way.

Why does he do that? Why doesn't God just let Abraham live with the consequences of his actions? Well, here's why. Because God is faithful to his promises.

[22 : 45] God has promised Abraham a land, a people and a blessing. And God is not going to go back on his word and God's plans are not foiled by mankind's actions.

And so God intervenes, sends diseases on Pharaoh's house. And Pharaoh understands that all of this is because of Sarah. So he sends her back to Abraham and sends them both out of Egypt.

Now, what a humbling rebuke that must have been for Abraham. Maybe he'd started to think about staying in Egypt. He seemed to be doing quite well for himself.

He might have started to forget about the promises that God had given him. We don't know, but from the text, it doesn't seem that he was in any hurry to leave Egypt.

How do you think that conversation went between Sarah and Abraham as they walked away from Egypt? They maybe talked about the promises that God had given them, talked about how they needed to obey God, how they needed to be forgiven.

[23 : 45] And as they thought about these promises, as they entered back into the land of Canaan, they maybe had an excitement about how God's plan would unfold. The amazing truth that this story shows us is that despite our shortcomings, despite our failings as weak people, and despite our natural desire to serve ourselves and not to serve God, despite all of that, God is still gracious and God still chooses to use us.

Like Abraham, each of us constantly does things wrong. We rebel against God and his word. We decide that our way is better and still God doesn't cast us away.

In fact, God shows us great grace because he goes even further than not just casting us away, but he's actually made it possible for us to be forgiven of our wrongdoings.

God sent his son Jesus to take the punishment that we deserve for the judgment of God so that we don't have to and so that we can be in a right relationship with God. But this doesn't give us a license to sin.

Just because we've been forgiven doesn't mean that we can purposefully walk in sin. But what Abraham should have done and what this passage is encouraging us to do is to honor God in both word and deed.

[25 : 10] This passage should be an encouragement for us to continue to trust and obey God even when life is really, really tough. So are we honoring God and living that out?

Maybe you're here this evening and you can't say that you're honoring God. Maybe you've never heard about this or you simply like to live life the way you see fit. Isn't it better to live life the way your creator designed you to?

See, God made humanity with a plan and a purpose. No matter what anybody tells you, we are not a mistake, but we are a created people who have a creator who cares for us and who loves us. Or maybe you're here this evening and you're thinking, well, I would love to know God and I would love to obey God and trust him, but I don't think God wants me. Maybe you're thinking that God wouldn't want you because of your past.

Well, let me tell you that that is not true. God is never limited because of your past. God's forgiveness has no limit. God's grace has no end and God's love is unfaltering.

[26 : 22] If God can take an imperfect man like Abraham and promise him amazing things, a land, promise him descendants that would become a great nation and promise him that he would be a blessing to all people.

If God can do that with an imperfect man like Abraham, God can definitely forgive you and me. And we can be absolutely sure that God will give us forgiveness because God is faithful.

And in his word, he promises his forgiveness to those who believe in him and accept him as Lord. Forgiveness has been made possible through Jesus and his death on a cross.

And the Bible says that all who believe in their hearts that Jesus is Lord and confess with their mouths will be forgiven. And their relationship with God will be made right.

And so will you honor God and will you live it out? Or maybe you have been forgiven. Maybe you've been a Christian for many years. We need to ask ourselves that very same question.

[27 : 27] Are we honoring God in both word and deed? Are we living out trust and obedience? Are we constantly waging war against sin?

Or have we become blind to the sin that has plagued us for years? Are we striving to live a holy life? Not because that will save us, but because we want to live a life of worship and we want to glorify God in everything that we do, think and say.

Abraham's story is an example which shows us the amazing truth that God uses people even when they are weak and when they are sinful. And that's an amazing truth because it means that God can use each and every one of us in this room.

Because each and every one of us is a fallen, imperfect human being. But God is still a mighty, awesome and powerful, forgiving God.

And so let's ask that question again. What does it mean to be a Christian? Well, it means to continue.

[28 : 39] It means to trust and obey God, to hear God speaking through his word, the Bible, to know God's plan and his promises for our lives and to trust him even when the world would tell us not to.

It means to continue to trust and obey God. It means to live lives that match what we say. It means to live lives that show our worship to God and to continue to trust and obey him even when life is extremely difficult.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, in this world which is fallen and corrupt because of sin, in this world which would constantly seek to pull our attention away from you and to focus on ourselves, Father, we ask that you would fix our eyes on you, that we would have a desire to trust you, that you would give us the strength to obey you and that we would live a long life of obedience and of adoration.

Father, we ask this because we love you and we love you because you loved us. We ask that you'd help us in this regard, help us trust and obey in all ways.

In Jesus' name, amen.