

Sabbath School Today **With the 1888 Message Dynamic**

Salvation by Faith Alone: The Book of Romans **Lesson 5: The Faith of Abraham**

When God called Abram out of Ur, what was his spiritual condition? We know that shortly after the Flood, Nimrod established the kingdom of Babel in rebellion against God (Gen. 10:8-10), and Ur was an area in that kingdom. We know that in this place the inhabitants worshiped the god of the crescent moon named Sin. Sin was thought to be the creator of all things, the father of all gods, including being the father of the sun god. We also know that Abram's father, Terah, worshiped idols and was so attached to them that when they left Ur, he took his idols with him.

"... Terah, [was] the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor: and they served other gods" (Josh. 24:2). Abram and his family didn't just have statues on their shelves to remind them of the gods they worshiped, as some have crosses or pictures of Christ on their walls, but "they served other gods." False gods were a very real part of their spiritual and daily experience. Abram's family were pagan through a superstitious blending of the deified things of nature, with a faded knowledge of the true Creator. They possessed a remnant knowledge of the pre-Flood experience of Cain and Seth's descendants, but had confounded that knowledge with pagan ideas about God.

Though the "father of the faithful" began his career in heathen darkness, Terah and Abram had access to a full knowledge of God through the witness of Shem, who lived for 502 years after the Flood (Gen. 11:10, 11). Shem, Noah's son, was still alive when Isaac, the son of promise, was born to Abraham. God has never been without a faithful witness who could call people out of darkness into the light of His redeeming love.

Though fading, it was the remnant knowledge of the one true God as kept alive by Shem, and the evidence of the Flood as judgment against sin, that held open the heart's door allowing the Holy Spirit to act upon Abram's heart. Living among a multitude of silent, powerless deities, there was One who with increasing clarity spoke to Abram through his conscience. "Faith in Christ is not the work of nature, but the work of God on human minds, wrought on the very soul by the Holy Spirit, who reveals Christ, as Christ revealed the Father." [1]

"Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee ... So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him" (Gen. 12:1, 4). "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went" (Heb. 11:8).

Unquestioning obedience, that's the characteristic of true faith. Faith "works" contrary to what human nature, or "common sense" tells us to do. Common sense would have

been to stay put, right where Terah's family had always lived. Common sense would have questioned that "still small voice" that called Abram out of the fertile and prosperous land along the Euphrates River, saying go to a land where he would remain "a stranger and a pilgrim" the rest of his life (Heb. 11:8-10, 13). Abram had to be removed from his "comfort zone" so he could be prepared for what God wanted to do with him. He had to be brought to the spiritual condition of total dependence upon the word of God, or he would never have become the "father of the faithful."

It took a series of trials that tested Abraham's confidence in God's creative word before he was "fully persuaded" of the power inherent in God's word. Only then it could be truly said of Abraham, "Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that what He had promised, He was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:18-22).

At the outset of his spiritual journey Abraham had no evidence that the thing God promised him (having a son and becoming heir of the world) would become an actuality. But God's gift of the measure of faith (Rom. 12:3) was cherished by Abraham and as he exercised it, it grew in strength. The remnant knowledge that Seth's God was the true Creator, as opposed to all other pretender gods like Sin, was key to Abraham's spiritual development.

"What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found?" (Rom. 4:1). What was it that Abraham "found"? "For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith" (Rom. 4:13). Abraham "found" righteousness through believing God's word. "And he believed in the Lord; and He counted [reckoned] it to him for righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Abraham could not "earn" this righteousness through the keeping of the law, nor through the rite of circumcision. "He received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all them that believe" (Rom. 4:11). The rite of circumcision did not make Abraham, nor any of his descendants, righteous. "For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love" (Gal. 5:6).

Abraham's righteousness was not "of debt," as though through his own "good works" God owed salvation to him. Nothing we can do will place God under obligation to us. Ellet J. Waggoner, one of the 1888 "messengers," understood this concept: "If anyone could do something for the Lord for which the Lord would be under obligation to him, then all things would not be from Him. That is to say, the idea of justification by works is opposed to the fact that God is the Creator of all things. And conversely, the recognition of God as Creator is the acknowledgment that righteousness comes from Him alone."

[2]

And thus, God's holy Sabbath rest is the sign and seal of righteousness in the final remnant people who recognize the Creator as the only source of power for overcoming sin and developing Christ-like characters (Rev. 14:6-12). Through the tested and proven faith of Jesus Christ—God's gift to us—our hearts are yielded, our wills submitted and our affections are firmly fixed upon the Saviour, and everything in this world loses its attractiveness. Righteousness by faith is the gift from God through Christ, the Author and Finisher of that faith.

Righteousness by faith is depending upon the word of God only to accomplish what it has promised: that it can create in fallen human beings that which does not exist without His power and presence in the life. "Faith is the expecting the word of God itself to do what the word says, and depending upon that word itself to do what the word says. ... Since the word of God is in itself creative, and so is able to produce and cause to appear what otherwise would never exist nor be seen; and since faith is the expecting the word of God only to do just that thing, and depending upon 'the word only' to do it, it is plain enough that faith is 'the evidence of things not seen.'" [3] "Thus it is the word of God that must work in you. You are not to work to do the word of God: the word is to work in you to cause you to do. ... The word of God being living and full of power, when it is allowed to work in the life, there will be powerful work wrought in that individual." [4]

Consider now God's promise that Abraham would be "heir of the world" (Rom. 4:13). What is Paul speaking of here? "I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession" (Gen. 17:8). In his witness before the Sanhedrin, Stephen spoke a well-known fact concerning Abraham and the possession of the land, that God "gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on" (Acts 7:5; NKJV). How do we reconcile this seeming contradiction?

"First let us note the fact that the inheritance promised is an everlasting inheritance. Abraham himself is to have it for an everlasting possession. But the only way in which Abraham and his seed may have everlasting possession of an inheritance is by having everlasting life. Therefore we see that in this promise to Abraham we have the assurance of everlasting life in which to enjoy the possession." [5]

"Do not forget that the covenant and the promise are the same thing, and that it conveys land, even the whole earth made new, to Abraham and his [spiritual] children. Remember also that since only righteousness will dwell in the new heavens and the new earth, the promise includes the making righteous of all who believe." [6]

"God has not said that if we will believe certain statements and dogmas, He will in return give us an everlasting inheritance. The inheritance is one of righteousness; and since faith means the reception of the life of Christ into the heart, together with God's righteousness, it is evident that there is no other way in which the inheritance can be received." [7]

“And this brings us to the conclusion of the matter, namely, that the promise to Abraham and to his seed that they should be heirs of the world, is the promise of Christ’s coming. ... *And so we find that we have as great an interest in the promise to Abraham as he himself had.* That promise is still open for all to accept. It embraces nothing less than an eternal life of righteousness in the earth made new as it was in the beginning. The hope of the promise of God unto the fathers was the hope of the coming of the Lord to raise the dead, and thus to bestow the inheritance.” [8]

—Ann Walper

Endnotes:

[1] Ellen G. White, *In Heavenly Places*, p. 51.

[2] Ellet J. Waggoner, *Waggoner on Romans*, p. 81.

[3] Alonzo T. Jones, *Review and Herald*, Jan. 3, 1899; Jones and Waggoner, *Lessons on Faith*, p. 19.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 108.

[5] *Waggoner on Romans*, p. 84.

[6] Ellet J. Waggoner, *The Glad Tidings*, a verse-by-verse study of Galatians, p. 72, CFI ed. (2016); Gal. 3:29.

[7] *Waggoner on Romans*, p. 88.

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 87.

Notes:

Pastor Paul Penno’s video of this lesson is on the Internet at:

https://youtu.be/x_hffE_NaD0

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