

Saving Faith

Today we look at the life of Abram (later to be named Abraham) as an example of one who lived by faith. A lot had happened to Abram since he answered God's call to enter the land of promise (Genesis 12:2-3). Abram was troubled by doubt and is in need of a fresh word from the Lord, assuring him that his wife, Sarai, would bear him a child and he would be the father of a great nation.

Follow as I read **Genesis 15:1-6**:

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."² But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"³ And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."⁴ But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir."⁵ He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be."⁶ And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Compared with the other events in Abram's life, this dialogue in our text seems relatively insignificant. Yet, "No event of Abraham's life surpasses this in importance" (Baldwin). Abram had already given evidence of profound faith through his willingness to trust and obey the Lord in making his 500-mile pilgrimage to the land of promise, believing that God would use him to be the father of a great nation, the people of God (Genesis 12:1ff). Abram's faith had faltered, but did not finally fail, and Abram went back to Bethel to renew his commitment to the Lord (13:3-4).

The importance of our text for today is the way it zeros in on the faith of Abram, whenever it may have begun, as a saving faith. Verse 6 is quoted in the New Testament by the apostles Paul and James as a summary of saving faith, the kind of faith in God that brings us into a relationship with God and that demonstrates its authenticity by obedience. This statement about Abram's saving faith became not only Paul's basis for his argument for salvation by grace alone through faith alone (Galatians 3, Romans 4); it also became the impetus for the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther's own conversion came through his understanding of this text as exegeted by Paul in Romans.

What is the basis of our salvation, of our being made right with God? How can anyone have assurance of eternal life, even though we at Dale Heights represent various rights of passage into church membership?

As we look at this passage, we note that saving faith begins with God's revelation. This entire episode in our text is about the word of the Lord coming to Abram. The word came to Abram by God's gracious initiative. There was nothing about Abram, who was called out of paganism, in a far country, at an advanced age, to commend him to God. And Sarai, by whom the promised child was to be born, was significantly beyond the age for bearing children.

And so we agree with the apostle Paul that there is nothing to commend us as God's chosen instruments, as the weak people whom God will use to show his surpassing greatness (1 Corinthians 1:18-31). God took the gracious initiative, marking us out for his own "before the creation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4).

Whether God came to you as a child, as was true for me when I first trusted Jesus as my Savior, or spoke his word to you in your confirmation or adulthood, in any case it was by his initiative. Apart from his initiative, we would be both unwilling and unable to seek the saving grace of God. Paul says we were dead in our transgressions and sins and were objects of God's wrath. "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4-5). God made the first move toward us because we were helpless, as was Abram. Our text for today has been called the John 3:16 of the Old Testament, which speaks about the amazing grace of God, who loved the world so much that he gave his one-of-a-kind Son to die for us.

But then there must be, as was true for Abram, and awareness about our need. Abram was confronted with his weakness and desperate need for God to act in his behalf; else he was a pitiable sojourner, marooned far away from home, the victim of an empty dream. Saving faith is possible only for hearts made humble before holy God. Perhaps this is an aspect of the childlikeness Jesus said is requisite for entrance into the kingdom of God. A child is totally dependent on others and is always in a position of weakness and helplessness (Mark 10:13-16). And it's always from a position of helplessness that anyone approaches God for his saving mercy and grace.

Decades ago, the gospel was often presented with clichés, such as "Smile. God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." Nothing was about sin and the need for repentance. And the reaction to this cloying presentation was often, "Why shouldn't God love me? After all, I'm a pretty good person." But God saves only those who realize a desperate need for what he can do to repair a broken life and a broken relationship with God.

God came to Abram, who was perhaps emotionally bruised and feeling a bit battered by disappointment, which he candidly expressed to God (2-4). Abram was ready to settle for second best in his life, assuming that it was impossible to expect a miracle in his and Sarai's life. And so, he decided that his adopted servant would become his heir and the progenitor of God's new people. God doesn't chide Abram for his doubts and weakness of faith, but rather answers him with a new revelation about his provision.

When God stirs us to saving faith he meets us right where we are. He allows us to express fears, doubts and reluctance to believe. God assures Abram that he is his shield, reward and also that he will work a miracle in giving him a direct heir from his seed and Sarai's body, and that as a result his offspring shall be as uncountable as the stars.

In the same way, when God stirs saving faith, he promises the free gift of eternal life. In our evangelism, we have erroneously focused almost exclusively on the promise

of life in heaven after we die. Yet God's salvation is the provision of eternal life, the life of God that begins immediately. It's the gift of new life in Christ, the life of God in us now, that makes us his new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Lord said to Abram, "I am your shield, your very great reward" (1). Eternal life is in essence the life of God lived in us, and God himself is to be the object of our pursuits and the joy and delight of life.

Saving faith involves our response. Abram "believed the Lord..." (6). He responded to God's revelation, to the word of God. Even our faith response is enabled by God. As Paul writes, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*" (Ephesians 2:8f). The entire process, grace and faith, is enabled by God.

When I reflect on the necessity of openness to God's truth as a component of saving faith, I think again about what Jesus said about the quality of childlikeness being essential for entrance into the kingdom of God (Mark 10:13-16). As a child is not predisposed to layers of formed opinions but is open to new truth, so we must come to God with an open, teachable spirit.

Abram was made open to God's revelation and was enabled to see with the eyes of faith. He was open to God's truth, and in some mysterious sense, this was about the truth of God the Savior. Jesus himself referred to this truth when he spoke to his religious opponents about how that "Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56).

The Christian gospel, the good news, is about God's Son, Jesus Christ, who came in the flesh, lived a sinless death and was crucified on the cross for our sins. He wasn't a hapless victim, but his mission was to come into the world to save sinners, knowing that his mission was to be fulfilled on the cross, not as a victim, but as a deliberate sacrifice for us (Mark 10:45; John 12:27). Like us, Abram too was a sinner in need of grace. And he received God's declaration of being righteous, which means that all barriers between God and him were removed. Christ paid Abram's and our sin debt.

A member of a former church I served shared a lovely story with me, how that he answered the call of God to resign his well-paying job to enroll in seminary classes. This brother of ours was concerned how he would pay the tuition for these classes, only to discover that one of his prayer partners had already paid his bill in full. That's what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. His suffering and death, the blood he shed, was adequate to pay for the sin debt we all owe to a holy God.

Then there comes the response of believing and trusting. "Abram believed the Lord..." Literally, he "amened" the Lord, and "Placed his entire weight upon" the truth of God's promise to him, which is the literal translation of this Hebrew word "to believe" (Kline, 95). Saving faith is more than intellectual assent to a propositional truth. Faith is the response of acceptance, trust and reliance.

Years ago I heard of the work of a Wycliffe Bible translator in a remote area of the world, working with a people who had never had any Scriptures written in their language. The translator was unable to find a word for faith, until a local man came

into the missionary's small office, and being exhausted, fell into a chair, saying how good it was to place his entire weight on the chair. The missionary-translator then heard the word he was looking for to translate "faith"—"to place one's weight upon."

And, even after we trust Christ for salvation, we continue to live by this faith as trust in God "against the odds. Paul says Abram didn't grow weak in his faith, even as days and years dragged on when there was no fulfillment to the promise. So, Paul quotes our text, saying this is why "it was reckoned (credited) to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:22). The kind of faith that saves is a faith that trusts that God's delays are not his denials, and that God's will must be done in his way and in his time.

Saving faith is all God's work and gift, apart from merit or effort on our part. It was only when Abram believed the Lord that he was credited with righteousness. God wanted Abram and Sarai to become "nothing" so that his grace and saving power might be everything. God waited until the body of Abraham was "as good as dead" (Romans 4:19). Saving faith is faith that reduces us to nothing before God that he might raise us up, as he raised Christ from the dead (Romans 4:24f).

God told Abram to count the stars, and if he could, he would know the number of his spiritual offspring (5). But this was an impossibility, and even today the best astronomers cannot count the stars in all the galaxies and quasars. And there's nothing we can do to save ourselves. If there were any other way for God to save us and make us his restored, forgiven children, there would have been no cross. This Jesus makes clear in his Gethsemane prayer. He asked the Father, if there was any other way to save the world apart from the looming cross, then by all means do it (Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:40-46). There's nothing we can ever do to add to what Christ has done for us.

Abram's faith wasn't without its struggles, but it would be the source of his strength that would enable him to pass the supreme test of his life, the offering of his son Isaac as a sacrifice (Genesis 22). This act of faith, according to James, is what demonstrated that Abraham had saving faith (James 2:21-24). Faith that saves us is a faith that continues to enable us to obey and follow and trust God, through all of life's tests. As was true in Abram's life, saving faith is faith that continues to act on God's word, even before the evidence.

Saving faith doesn't just give a new legal standing with God and an entrance into heaven when we die. Faith that saves is faith that brings us into a personal, life-changing relationship with God. Salvation is primarily a relationship with God. Abraham was called God's friend, and so are we (James 2:23). Christ wants for us what he gave to Abram, grace to believe and for trust and obedience to him as Lord. Simply, God wants a relationship with us. He will forgive and put us right with himself, that we might be his friends forever.