

## Genesis 15:1–6

<sup>1</sup>After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” <sup>2</sup>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?” <sup>3</sup>And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” <sup>4</sup>And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” <sup>5</sup>And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” <sup>6</sup>And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.



This morning we part from 2 Thessalonians to do some extended study on the faith that grows abundantly for which Paul and his colleagues were so thankful to God. I find it needful in my own soul to understand what Paul saw in these believers that convinced him that their faith was growing abundantly.

I suggested last week that faith in God and dependence upon God are very nearly the same thing. Now we hold salvation to be by faith alone. This is a core doctrine of the Bible on which there can be no compromise. If we do compromise on this doctrine, we are denying Christ himself. Without faith it is impossible to please God.<sup>1</sup> Faith is essential to all of life. All of life is dependent on God.

What are we dependent on God for? The only right answer to this question is, *everything*. The person without faith is likely to say that he or she depends on God for nothing. Yet it is entirely impossible to exist and to be sustained in existence without the continual direct connection between Creator and all of his creation. Strange as it may seem, even evil creatures—Satan and demons—could not exist unless their existence is sustained by Jesus Christ.

This brings up a question in my mind. What of the beliefs of Satan and demons? Can it ever be said that demons possess anything akin to faith? In James 2 we find an interesting and challenging discourse on the subject of faith. In 2:19 we read, “**You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!**” The solemn confession of absolute monotheism juxtaposed with the beliefs of demons. What is James thinking?

If demons believe in God, why are they not included in salvation? If they believe in God, why do they oppose God? Why do they spread evil instead of serving the righteousness of God, the righteousness that God requires? And why does James even bring demons into his discourse on faith?

Evidently, to acknowledge what is true concerning Jesus Christ is not akin to saving faith—though who would ever suggest that saving faith does not acknowledge what is true concerning Jesus Christ? So what is the difference between what demons believe and what genuine Christians believe—bearing in mind that *faith* and *belief* are translated from the same word in the language of the Bible?

There are those who would convince us—if they could, and with exhausting dictionary definitions—that faith or belief is simply acknowledging what is true about Jesus Christ. It is enough for salvation, we are told, to

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 11:6.

simply confess with the mouth that we believe in Jesus. But does this definition of faith, saving faith, answer what the Bible *describes* as faith? Dictionary definitions aside, how is faith actually *described* in the lives of those we encounter on the pages of our Bibles?

In James 2, James is making an important argument regarding the *nature*<sup>2</sup> of faith: specifically, the faith by which or through which a sinful human being is brought out of the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of God. It is the Holy Spirit who is speaking through James, and the Holy Spirit is being quite explicit about the nature of faith. Why does he think this explicit description is necessary?

Because faith is something that can be easily distorted; and there are those who readily lay hold of a distorted faith supposing it is not at all inferior to true faith—indeed, that the faith they have is exactly the faith of which the Bible speaks at great length and with heavy emphasis.

But there is a problem that is not easy to detect. Their faith is nothing like Abraham’s faith. If there is a bottom line in this, it is that many have embraced salvation by faith alone with a kind of faith that is more like the belief of demons and less like the faith of Abraham. It can be exceedingly dangerous to make assumptions about faith without hearing all that the Scriptures say about it. It is also dangerous to depend on a dictionary rather than a biblical *description* of faith.

Following James’ argument down the page we come to verse 21 where he writes,

**James 2:21–23**

<sup>21</sup>Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup>You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; <sup>23</sup>and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God.

How in the world did James become so theologically confused—if, indeed, he actually is theologically confused? Some will quickly point out that this is not something Paul would write down in a letter. Well, actually, Paul did write something like this in a letter: “**For we are [God’s] workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them**” (Ephesians 2:10).

We turn our attention to Abraham. The biblical account of his life extends from Genesis 12 through 25.

Abraham, it seems to me, is a good case study for the kind of faith Paul refers to in 2 Thessalonians 1:3, a faith that somehow grows abundantly. It seems to me that if you want to know what this kind of faith looks like in real life, Abraham is a perfectly valid case study. In multiplied future generations after God calls Abraham, when God himself desires to set forth his identity, he will often say, “**I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.**”<sup>3</sup> But it is Abraham more than any other who is given a more prominent place in the

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<sup>2</sup> When we describe the nature of something, we are describing its essential characteristics. For example, the Bible describes the *nature* of fallen humanity by pointing to the moral/ethical behaviors that reveal our character.

<sup>3</sup> This phrase, and similar phraseology, occurs nearly a hundred times across the expanse of the Bible.

history of God's unfolding plan of salvation. You might take the time later to listen to how the New Testament makes use of Abraham as an instrument of God for the instruction of his people:

John the Baptist: Matthew 3:7-9

James, the leader of the Jerusalem church:<sup>4</sup> James 2:21-23

The apostle Paul: Romans 4; Galatians 3

The Lord Jesus Christ: John 8:31-40



We turn to Genesis to examine the account of Abraham's place in the biblical record of God's plan for our salvation. What does his life teach us about the nature of faith?

Genesis 15:6 is critical: "**And [Abraham] believed Yahweh, and he [Yahweh] counted it to him as righteousness.**" The Lord gives his own righteousness to those who believe. This is what Moses means by the word "**counted.**" But before we give Abraham the credit for believing the Lord, we must take account of something important. God called Abraham to leave his worldly homeland and follow him to a distant country. The name of the country was Canaan. It was to become Abraham's possession and the possession of Abraham's descendants.

Abraham did not depart from his homeland<sup>5</sup> because he decided one day to go out looking for a better land where he could make a new home. In an act of divine grace, and to satisfy his own purpose in salvation, *God* acted to bring Abraham out of his captivity to false gods in Ur. Hundreds of years later God, by that same divine grace, and again to satisfy his own purpose, will bring the people of Israel out of a cruel captivity in Egypt.

#### Genesis 12:1-8

<sup>1</sup>Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

What is Abraham being commanded by God to do here if not *to take God at his word*? And what does it mean to take God at his word if not to depend upon the God who speaks words of promise to Abraham? The writer of Hebrews will look back upon this passage and preach it to his congregation: "**By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going**" (Hebrews 11:8). Earlier he had cited Abel and then Enoch; and after Enoch, Noah. He then summarizes:

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<sup>4</sup> James is also the half-brother of our Lord Jesus Christ who was himself not a believer in Christ until after the resurrection.

<sup>5</sup> According to Genesis 11:28ff., Ur of the Chaldeans was the place where Abraham grew up with his parents and grandparents. Abraham's father did not travel to Canaan. He settled in a place called Haran. It was after Abraham's father (Terah) died that Abraham was summoned by God to journey to a place God give him. In Genesis 15:7 we read "**I am Yahweh who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.**" See also Nehemiah 9:7.

### Hebrews 11:13–16

<sup>13</sup>These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. <sup>14</sup>For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. <sup>15</sup>If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup>But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

As Abraham's faith grows, it becomes apparent that his belief is less anchored in a geographical position on earth and far more anchored in a divine person in heaven.

<sup>4</sup>So Abram went...<sup>6</sup>Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. <sup>7</sup>Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. <sup>8</sup>From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD.

For the first time in his life Abraham is able to worship the God who reconciles sinners to himself. For 75 years he lived in relative ignorance of the only true God. For 75 years he lived with the belief that the idols of the Chaldeans were gods worthy of worship.<sup>6</sup> But the true God commands Abraham to cut off his ties to idolatry, to turn to the only true God, to depend upon the only true God. Over time Abraham will learn what kind of God Yahweh is who makes such promises to a sinner.

So, on the east of Bethel Abraham pitches his tent. There he builds an altar. There he calls upon the name of Yahweh.

What comes next, when Abraham finally reaches the land of Canaan, reveals two things. First, it shows us that Abraham is still reluctant to depend on God alone. Second, it shows that Abraham is teachable: he is *responsive* to the God who has revealed himself. Abraham is at least willing to have his worldview entirely transformed. In the progress of this transformation, Abraham's faith will be measured by, and revealed in, his growing dependence upon God.

### Genesis 12:10

<sup>10</sup>Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.

Abraham's time in Egypt did more damage to Abraham's soul than anything a famine could do to his body. Abraham shows himself to be quite willing to lie—no, quite *determined* to lie. In fact, Abraham actually depends on a lie to save him from what he thought was a certain death at the hands of Pharaoh.<sup>7</sup> In Abraham's mind there was no other choice than to follow his own humanly conceived plan to survive. At this point his wisdom convinced him that it was entirely sensible *and necessary* to leave the land of promise and sojourn in a land that God did not promise in order to survive the famine. This same wisdom convinced him to rest his hopes for survival on a clever lie about his wife being his sister.

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<sup>6</sup> See Joshua 24:1-2.

<sup>7</sup> That Abraham's fears might have been based on Egypt's reputation is an empty rationalization. Regardless of Pharaoh's reputation to kill in order to get what he wants, Abraham's fate is in the hands of Yahweh, not Pharaoh.

**Genesis 12:11–13**

<sup>11</sup>When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, “I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance,  
<sup>12</sup>and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me, but they will let you live.  
<sup>13</sup>Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.”

What Abraham does is not an act of trust in God. Furthermore, Abraham will learn that God will never use a mixture of truth and falsehood in order to bring about the fulfillment of the covenant promises he makes. Unfortunately, Abraham did not learn this truth the first time around. “He who will not learn from history is doomed to repeat it.”<sup>8</sup>

We come to another chapter of Abraham’s life of faith. Is Abraham’s faith growing abundantly? Genesis 13 helps us answer the question. This time the test of dependence upon God is a very different kind: astonishing prosperity, nearly the opposite of famine. Abraham and his nephew Lot have become rich in livestock. Yet first notice something important in Genesis 13:4. Abraham returns “**to the place where his tent had been at the beginning...to the place where he had made an altar at first. And there Abram called upon the name of the LORD.**”

Strife between Abraham’s herdsmen and Lot’s herdsmen arises. In such prosperity the land was not big enough to sustain them both. They must separate. Yet notice the subtleties of Abraham’s dependence upon his God in verse 9. Abraham speaks to Lot:

**Genesis 13:9–13**

<sup>9</sup>Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.”

This sounds like a man who is beginning to learn something about God (not to mention something about his nephew Lot). God is worthy of Abraham’s trust. And Abraham’s faith in God is growing. Abraham surrenders his future to God’s providence. God will provide. Abraham will depend. By every right accorded him, Abraham had first choice of the land. He is the elder; Lot is the younger; he is the uncle; Lot is the nephew. But Abraham did not lay claim to his rights. He gives Lot the right and privilege of first choice. Abraham will take what Lot rejects.

Abraham is not looking out for himself and his own interests as he did before. He *begins* to realize that the God who called him also commands his destiny. So Abraham returns “**to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there he calls upon the name of Yahweh**” (v. 4). Abraham’s faith will face future challenges, and he will falter again. But yes, his faith is growing: slowly, but still abundantly.

Without doubt, the most familiar chapter in Abraham’s life of faith is the chapter in which he is commanded by Yahweh to offer up his son Isaac as a burnt offering (Genesis 22). I wonder if it might have seemed to Abraham that he was back in Ur doing worship with tribal deities that were perceived as demanding

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<sup>8</sup> See Genesis 20:1-2. The quote about learning from history is attributed to George Santayana, a Spanish philosopher who was born in 1863 and died in 1952.

this kind of barbarism from their worshippers. The command issued to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac has been much maligned by the popular press.

Be that as it may, Abraham does not hesitate to obey. He does not delay his obedience for even a day. He does not wait. He does not protest. He does not waver in unbelief. Listen to the sermon we know as the book of Hebrews:<sup>9</sup>

#### Hebrews 11:17–19

<sup>17</sup>By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, <sup>18</sup>of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” <sup>19</sup>He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Hebrews 11:19 is revealing. Abraham “**considered that God was able even to raise [Isaac] from the dead.**” You see, it is not a geographical location on earth that interests Abraham or that compels his unswerving devotion. It is God himself. “**God is able.**”<sup>10</sup>

A faith that grows abundantly is a faith that finds its only resting place in the object of that faith: God himself.

Suppose a question is put to Abraham: “What kind of God does God have to be in order to call you out of a world of sin, lifeless idolatry, personal destruction and final condemnation, into a new life of blessing, hope for the world, personal and international<sup>11</sup> reconciliation and final destination in ‘**the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God**’?”<sup>12</sup>

Loved ones, if all we knew was *who* it is who designs and builds the city, would it not draw from us our deepest longings, and compel from us a faith that grows and grows and grows, a full and unwavering dependence upon such a God as God must be? You see, it isn’t really so much about the city; it is about the Designer. It isn’t so much about the building; it’s about the Builder. For Abraham, I do not think it was ever all about the geography of Canaan, wonderful as the prospects must have been for him to possess such a land. I do not believe Abraham’s faith was about what God could or would do for him, wonderful as the covenant provisions must have sounded to his empty soul.

There is a faith. The nature of this faith is to give evidence of God.<sup>13</sup> Yes, evidence of God’s righteous judgment, but also evidence of God in famine. Evidence of God in affliction. Evidence of God in persecution. Evidence of God in heartbreak. Evidence of God in disappointment. Evidence of God in our failures, our frustrations, our deepest fears and our longest seasons of storm and darkness.

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<sup>9</sup> Hebrews is called a “**word of exhortation**” in 13:22. This indicates that the written document was very likely preached to a gathering of people.

<sup>10</sup> See Matthew 3:9 (parallel Luke 3:8); also 2 Corinthians 9:8; Philippians 4:19.

<sup>11</sup> Note that the covenant stated in Genesis 12 ends with, “**and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**” The covenant will encompass all the nations of the earth with the offer of reconciliation that is founded upon the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>12</sup> See Hebrews 11:10.

<sup>13</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:5.

Paul gave thanks to God for a faith in Thessalonica that gave evidence of God within the hardships of afflictions and persecutions and distresses and situations in life that would strive against God's righteous judgment and cast God in the role of an incompetent deity: If he cannot make life easy for his people in their place in this world, what is he good for? This is the sneer of unbelief, the scorn of doubt.

Heaven is the highest place because of who it is who dwells there. It is where Jesus Christ dwells. And the road from here to there is always uphill, isn't it? But Jesus Christ is there. Sometimes he kneels there in intercession for you. Sometimes he stands as if poised to place the crown of life upon your head.

**James 1:12**

<sup>12</sup>Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

He is worthy of our faith. We can depend on his word of promise. But will our lives in this world be entirely shaped by his promise or only partially shaped? We depend upon him for a few religiously oriented things when he wants us to depend on him for all things. A faith that is growing abundantly is the province of souls who are content to depend upon God for everything because of who God is.