

# Abraham and the Life of Faith

## “To His Credit”

*“Abram believed the LORD,  
and he credited it to him as righteousness.”*  
Genesis 15:6

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Just a two weeks ago the Christianity lost one of the giants of our faith – Ravi Zacharias. As well as being an incredibly gifted apologist and proponent of logic, Ravi was a great story teller. I came across one of his stories this week in what I think was his last book, *The Logic of God*. I'll repeat it in Ravi's words, but not his endearing accent:

Growing up in India, I heard a story of a little boy who had lots of pretty marbles. But he was constantly eyeing his sister's bagful of candy. One day he said to her, "If you give me all your candy, I'll give you all my marbles." She gave it much thought and agreed to the trade. He took all her candy and went back to his room to get his marbles. But the more he admired them, the more reluctant he became to give them all up. So he hid the best of them under his pillow and took the rest to her. That night, she slept soundly, while he tossed and turned restlessly, unable to sleep and thinking, *I wonder if she gave me all the candy?*<sup>1</sup>

Here's the thing, all of us possess flaws of character, morality, habits – and those flaws become a lens through which we see the world and evaluate the actions of others. Because we are sometimes less than honest, we assume everyone else is less than honest. If we are given to sarcasm, we read others comments as being sarcasm. If we have a tendency towards selfishness, then we see others as being selfish. Paul would note: *"To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure."*<sup>a</sup> Unfortunately, this tendency also taints our view and thoughts of God. It is hard for us to imagine, or dare I say, trust, that God always has our best interests in mind, or is perfectly loving, forgiving, and merciful. Like the little boy and his newly acquired bag of candy, we suspect that we are not getting it all, because we have never given all.

Upon reaching Genesis chapter 15 Abram has already lived one of our lifetimes, and has experienced many adventures and changes. Ever since the call of God came to him in Ur, and we have no idea how early that call had come, Abram's faith has been growing – sometimes in leaps and bounds, at other times is the tiniest of increments. I'm sure we all share in that experience, where our faith is, unlike a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket, is not on a continuous ascending arc, picking up speed as it soars, but instead we find ourselves at times struggling. However, the episode we reflect on today from the life of Abram shows us that God takes the initiative to invite us into a new relationship that leads to righteousness.

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<sup>a</sup> Titus 1:15

## God's Initiative

<sup>1</sup> After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." <sup>2</sup> But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" <sup>3</sup> And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

"After this..." – literally, "after these things..." The conversation that takes place in Chapter 15 does not stand isolated from all that has gone on before in Abram's life. After these things tells us that this conversation flows from the call of Abram in Ur; from his arrival in Canaan to departure to Egypt; from his encounter with the Pharaoh to his departure from Lot; from the rescue of Lot from marauding kings to the respite offered the king of Salem and the rudeness of the king of Sodom – and all through "these things" the faith of Abram has been growing. He is now ready for a new encounter – a new revelation of God.

God's first words "Do not be afraid, Abram," inform us that "these things" are weighing on the mind of Abram. Perhaps he is spending one of those restless nights, when no matter how hard you try, the mind just keeps racing. And just as God would come to Isaac and Jacob during times of upheaval in their lives, he has come to Abram with a word of reassurance – praise the Lord that His word still comes to us when we are stressed, harassed and disturbed by our thoughts. Being told, "Do not be afraid" alerts us to the thoughts of Abram – he is experiencing fear. Someone has written: "...fear is the tyrant of the imagination. It imposes itself upon us from the shadows, from its hazy mirror of maybe."<sup>2</sup> Yet, sometimes fears are very real – there *is* real danger, real turmoil. From the words of the Lord, it would appear Abram has two fears.

First, he has just defeated four powerful kings whose reach extends into the very land in which Abram is dwelling. We have been conditioned in our thinking by action heroes, X-Men, and Avengers, who can thwart an alien invasion one minute and attend a formal dinner the next – all the while showing no signs that they almost died. I don't know if you've noticed, but real life is not like that. People shake. They grow quiet. They seek solitude. Abram knows how the world operates, and in his world, kings do not take defeat lightly, and very likely he is expecting a return visit. And so, God comes to Abram and assures him – "I am your shield..."

Many years later a young shepherd boy would charge a giant of a man who was taunting the armies of the Lord. Almost missed in that story is that the giant also

had a shield, held by a shield-bearer who ran before him – yet it did no good. The shield before Goliath failed, the bearer fading unnoticed from the encounter. David too had a shield. David knew that the shield before him was God Himself – he even wrote a song about it:

“The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;<sup>3</sup> my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior—from violent men you save me. <sup>4</sup> I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies.

2 Samuel 22:2-4

Paul urges us to don the full armor of God, reminding us to take up the shield of faith – which is far more than just a piece of stout wood or sheet metal – our shield is God himself. God tells Abram, “I am your shield...”, addressing one of his fears.

Abram's other fear seemed to be related to the promise. Though he has just conquered powerful foes, he is still defeated by a lack of children. I don't have to say 'in that time' because in all times the unmet desire for children can be quite painful, but even moreso when you have been promised to be made into a great nation, whose offspring will inhabit the land in which you dwell, and whose numbers will be like the dust of the earth. But it hasn't happened yet, and the clock is ticking.

What is it that will make your life complete? Don't rush, really think about that. Here is Abram, desperately longing for offspring, and God says to him: “I am your very great reward.” Some translations rendering ‘your exceedingly great reward.’ The question is, for Abram, is that enough? Is it enough for us? This is a question that Abram will wrestle with for years, that will lead to one of the most remarkable episodes in his life. However, at this moment God is both comforting and challenging Abram's thinking, asking Abram: “Am I enough?”

F.B. Meyer writes: All lovely things sleep in Him, as all colours hide in a sunbeam's ray, waiting to be unravelled. To have God is to have everything.”<sup>3</sup> Here's the rub: for many of us while we want everything, and we seek it apart from God, or we try to add God to our everything. The thing is though, God wants to *be* our everything. He knows that if He does not occupy first in our lives, then our lives will unravel, our priorities will be messed up, and His child will never be all they could be. Abram hasn't reached that point in his faith yet, but it

is growing. For the first time he enters into dialogue with God, not doubting God, but in a way challenging God. "O Sovereign Lord," is a new title for God – offered by a man whose faith is deepening and who is reminding God about the promise and wondering if he maybe was expecting too much from this God, that he had to lower his expectations – though he does acknowledge that a child would be a gift of God – "you have given me no children."

### God's Invitation

<sup>4</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." <sup>5</sup> He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

This is a great verse to read after the historic rocket launch yesterday that has once again given mankind thoughts of reaching for the moon, Mars and beyond. But note, in answer to Abrams suggestion the word to Abram here is firm. Swindoll writes: If you could read the Lord's response in the Hebrew language, His denial would blow your hair back.<sup>4</sup> God invites Abram outside and under a canopy of stars he asks the old man to look up. There was a time in Abram's life when he would have worshipped an object in the sky—the moon—but this time he is invited to look at the stars in a new light. "Look at the stars Abram," God says, "Can you count them? No, you can't – and that is how many your offspring shall be. Numberless."

If you've ever had the fortune of being out in the wilderness, far from any light pollution from a city or town, undoubtedly, you've been blown away by the night sky. I know on many an occasion I have heard the words of the Psalmist as a gazed at the stars: "*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*"<sup>b</sup> There are few created things more glorious and awesome as a dazzling star filled night sky.

Let's put aside for now any discussion of how Abrams suggestion reflected known ancient Near East practices and customs regarding adoption and inheritance. Instead let's take a moment to gaze into the night sky with Abram. This would have been a powerful illustration, God saying with an image, "Abram, if I could create this, and place each of these stars into place, how much more can I do for you?" That night, and every other night, I picture Abram leaving his tent to just walk out among the stars, admiring the night sky in a whole new way, for

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<sup>b</sup> Psalm 19:1

it would be an almost daily reminder of God's might and power – and the promise. Abram would know, "I *will* have a son – my very *own* flesh and blood. And one day my offspring will be as numberless as the stars. I know this because my shield, my exceedingly great reward, has promised.

And as for expecting too much from God, he had no idea. That night and others as he gazed at those stars, he had no idea that you and I were also represented among there number. He had no idea that his family tree would incorporate other peoples. That all who would one day follow in his footsteps of faith would be deemed to be his children. That night something happened in the heart of Abram. A change took place leading us to be introduced to a whole new word in Scripture – *believed*.

### God's Identification

<sup>6</sup> *Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*

This verse is a game changer. It was for Paul – who came to realize that the righteousness he thought he could attain by effort, that had to be earned, that could only be given if achieving perfection, would actually be a gift. For Luther, Paul's exegesis of this verse in Romans lead to the doctrine of *sola fide* – faith alone. Luther came to see, as did Paul, that "... *in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."*<sup>c</sup>

However, that little word *believe* should not be misinterpreted or taken too lightly. It doesn't mean believe as in the sense that I believe it's going to rain tomorrow, or I believe in UFO's, or I believe the Buffalo Bills are going to be awesome this year – I really do believe that! – but that is not what the word here means. We've reduced *believed* to the level of an opinion – a wish. However, what Abram experienced here was much more than that. There is a definite firmness, a certainty to this word. When Jehoshaphat lead the people out into battle he exhorted them: "**Trust** in the Lord your God and you will **be safe! Trust** in the message of his prophets and you will win."<sup>d</sup>

A quote that often comes to mind was offered by Professor Del Tackett of *Focus on the Family*, in the Bible Study series "The Truth Project", asking the question:

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<sup>c</sup> Romans 1:17

<sup>d</sup> 2 Chronicles 20:20; bolded words translate *aw-man*, the Hebrew word used in Genesis 15:6 where it is rendered *believed*.

“Do you really believe that what you believe is really real.” What he is ‘really’ saying is, that if you really believe something then it changes your behaviour, it alters your thoughts, desires, appetites, actions. Because I believe the label on the bottle with a skull and crossed bones is harmful –I will not drink it.

Catherine Booth told the story of a conversation held between Bramwell and an obviously inebriated man one evening on a bus. This is how she tells it:

My dear son, only a little while ago, on the top of an omnibus, was speaking to a man who was the worse for liquor, and using very improper language; trying to show him the danger of his evil, wicked course, as a transgressor of the law of God, “Oh!” said the man, “It is not by works, it is by faith, and I believe as much as you do.”<sup>5</sup>

Your belief in a higher power means little if the higher power is always outside of you, apart from you. If you say you believe in God, but your life bears no evidence of conforming to Jesus, your belief is just an opinion. When the Philippian jailer pleaded with Paul and Silas, “...*what must I do to be saved?*” *They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”* (Acts 16:30-31)

Believing is not just a mental acknowledgement, or a casual opinion – if you really believed then it would really change you. If we really believe then we must take Jesus at His word – and Jesus is quite clear that to believe in Him is to die to self; to believe in Him is to take up our cross and follow. It is a believing that is demonstrated in actions. John Stott, another giant of the faith who has gone to be with the Lord, wrote: “...although justification is by faith alone, this faith cannot remain alone. If it is living and authentic, it will inevitably issue in good works, and if it does not, it is spurious.”<sup>6</sup>

James makes this argument:

*“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”<sup>e</sup>*

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<sup>e</sup> James 2:14-17

Now a careless reading of James may lead one to think James preaches a work-based righteousness, but that is not the case. He is merely asserting that faith—saving faith—always expresses itself outwardly. “Saving faith and serving love belong together.”<sup>7</sup> James doesn’t say the works save one, only that they testify to the inner transformation of the heart. Even the demons believe there is one God, but that doesn’t make them any less demons. No, there needs to be a change of heart – a change that comes when saving faith is received.

## Conclusion

Friend, have you believed in the lord Jesus Christ? Have you heard His gospel and been humbled by His message and become convinced of your sinfulness and need for His forgiveness? Have you sensed a deep hunger and thirst, an unquenchable emptiness in your heart, a lack of purpose in your life? Believe in Him.

But note that Paul rightly demonstrates that this salvation does not come from observing external rites and ceremonies. Do not get me wrong, the sacraments can be a means of grace, of us drawing towards or becoming more aware of God’s presence, but they have, in of themselves, no saving value. Being circumcised, being baptized, receiving communion, making confession, attending church – all of these are good and beautiful, but they are of no value unless an inner change has taken place. Simon the sorcerer also believed and was baptized, and followed Philip everywhere, yet no change had taken place inwardly, leading to Peter’s warning him, “You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God.”<sup>f</sup>

That young boy whose story led us off, because of his own dishonesty, thought everyone else equally dishonest. Because his heart was not right (whether he was aware or not), led him to assume that everyone else’s heart was not right. Perhaps today you are in a similar place. Your unfaithfulness causes you to think that God cannot be totally faithful. Your rage and bitterness, leads you to think everyone is rageful and bitter, and so you cannot fathom a God who is meek and gentle. Perhaps you possess an unforgiving spirit, so you cannot imagine that God can forgive you. You find it so easy to hate that you cannot imagine a God of love. Oh, believe in Him. Make Him your desire. Make Him your goal. He will not hold out on you. He wants to give you all of Himself, but first you must place your trust in Him, by giving Him all of you. I pray that like

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<sup>f</sup> Acts 8:21

Abram, you will believe Him, and so receive that faith which will lead you to righteousness—a righteousness that comes from God through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.<sup>9</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Rave Zacharias, *The Logic of God: 52 Essentials for the Heart and Mind* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Dr David Jeremiah, *What Are You Afraid Of?: Facing Down Your Fears with Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), ebook.

<sup>3</sup> F.B. Meyer, *Abraham: The Obedience of Faith* (Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1960), 63.

<sup>4</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Abraham* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2014), 56.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Booth, *Papers on Godliness* (London: International Headquarters, 1890), 4.

<sup>6</sup> John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 57.

<sup>7</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Radical Disciple* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 58.

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<sup>9</sup> Romans 3:22