

The UNION

Get Ready to Meet the King!

God Calls His Church to
Truth, Faith and Holiness

2019

Joan H. Richardson

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CHAPTER 19

Abram, Messenger of Grace

²⁰ But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? ²² Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: And he was called the Friend of God. (James 2:20-23)

Where did James get a thought like that? Did Paul say the same thing differently? The idea is in the Book of Beginnings:

“In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

(Genesis 22:18 NKJV) –YHWH, speaking to Abraham

Abram’s Faith

When the LORD called him out of Haran, He told Abram to leave his kindred and his home and go to a land He would show him. Lot, his deceased brother’s son, went with him and Sarai, his wife. God promised to bless them who’d bless him and curse them who’d curse him, and that in him, all families on the earth would be blessed. He was seventy-five.

First, Abram came to Shechem where God appeared to him, showing him the land he had given him; he built an altar to Him there. (Gen. 12:7) Then he moved, pitching his tent east of Bethel and built a second altar, calling on His name. In time, Abram went south; when famine struck, he journeyed farther south to Egypt. Though he made some bad choices in Egypt, God still blessed him until Pharaoh sent him home. [See Gen, 12:10-20] Returning to Shechem, he called on the name of the LORD again.

Both Lot and Abram had been made rich in Egypt with herds and flocks. Now their herdsmen were contending because there was not enough land for them all. So he offered Lot his choice

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these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. ¹¹ And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

(Genesis 15:7-11 NKJV)

Abram had believed God would give him an heir, and YHWH had promised him land for them, but he wanted to know how he could be *certain* of the *promise*. He had heard the LORD and had seen the land, but how could he *be sure* the land he saw would be his? Abram should have believed God who had promised it to him, but he doubted the promise. Not discussing it further, the LORD commanded him to bring sacrifices, for *without shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness*. (See Heb. 9:22b NIV; Lev. 17:11) When the devil came again, he chased him off.

The LORD had promised him innumerable descendants and had chosen him to believe in the greatest promise that men and angels had witnessed. His faith, which at first had responded to the promise for descendants, was tested by the next words God spoke, granting him land. First, however, he'd learn the lessons we all must learn: the virtue of faith in God and the danger of unbelief.

Terrified!

On the night of the sacrifices, God circumcised Abram's heart with fear that painfully exposed his sin, separating the flesh from the spirit. In his horror, Abram's heart was changed: his terror turned to dread; remorse became repentance. God instilled His fear in Abram's heart to prepare him for the confirmation of his faith: the necessary discipline of obedience. Much later, His prophets obeyed God by the same fear and by the same faith.

And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him. (Genesis 15:12)

As Abram slept, he woke to the reality of his sin, and in his horror, he agonized in the dark. His own unbelief appalled him, but God would console him by grace, accepting his sacrifices, and making Abram an example for generations: when we doubt God, we sin by unbelief. Nobody can enter the kingdom, not

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even the father of our faith, Abraham, apart from faith in the words of God and the acceptable blood sacrifice for our sins.

¹³ And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land *that is* not their's, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years;

¹⁴ And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance,

¹⁵ And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age.

¹⁶ But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites *is* not yet full.

(Genesis 15:13-16)

As God had foretold, the consequences of Abram's unbelief would come upon his descendants: More than a century later, his great-grandsons refused to believe their brother's dreams. In envy, they rose against Joseph and sold him into slavery. But his dreams came to pass when his family entered Egypt to escape the famine. Falling on their faces before their brother who ruled beside Pharaoh, they saw his prophecies fulfilled. The Egyptians would make slaves of their Hebrew descendants, as the LORD had prophesied to Abram after he doubted Him. God sent his descendants into Egypt only to become slaves for four hundred years. That was the long-range consequence of his own unbelief.

The popular teaching is that by the sacrifices and ceremony, God simply cut a covenant for the land, according to the customs of the heathens; however, God doesn't follow pagan rituals but changes pagan hearts to follow Him. Make no mistake, He ordered blood sacrifices to cover Abram's sin; thus, God cut a blood covenant prophetically in grace for the father of our faith.

And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces.

(Genesis 15:17)

Later that night as he dreamed, Abram saw a vision: a smoking furnace and a burning torch passed between the sacrifices, and the presence of God moved through the midst of them. The

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destiny of unbelief is fearful—a furnace that burns forever; but the Word is the light of God that leads believers into everlasting life. The choices were before Abram: faith or unbelief, life or death, truth or deceit, light or darkness; just as they are before us. These opposing forces have tested men’s souls since Eden.

⁴⁹ So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just,
⁵⁰ and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:49-50)

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. (Psalm 119:105)

When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss.
(Revelation 9:2 NIV)

“And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. (John 3:19 NKJV)

The Comparison

When Zechariah, the husband of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth, saw the angel of the LORD, he appeared at the right side of the altar of incense in the sanctuary. Gabriel prophesied he would beget a son by his elderly wife. But he replied like Abram:

¹⁸ “How can I know this?” Zechariah asked the angel. “For I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years.”

¹⁹ The angel answered him, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and tell you this good news. ²⁰ Now listen! You will become silent and unable to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time.”

(Luke 1:18-20 HCSB)

Zechariah’s unbelief did not deter the faithfulness of God or thwart the plans His messenger had announced. Though we must

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face the consequences of our unfaithfulness, the gifts and calling of God depend on His faithfulness, not ours. He is the Sovereign One before whom we must bow.

Six months later, a young virgin in Nazareth was troubled by a similar greeting from Gabriel: *“Rejoice, favored woman! The Lord is with you!”* (See Lk. 1:28 HCSB) After he announced the plan of God, she asked, *“How can this be, since I haven’t been intimate with a man?”* (See Lk. 1:34 HCSB) Mary was asking how this would happen. She had not expressed doubt but wonder and curiosity. The angel explained, the conception would occur by the Holy Spirit, to which she replied, *Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word* (Lk. 1:38)—an expression of humility and faith. (See Lk. 1:26-38)

²¹ Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, *then* have we confidence toward God. ²² And whatever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.
(1 John 3:21-22)

After Abram gave a tithe of his war spoils to Melchizedek, the Word of God came to him in a vision, promising him as many descendants as the incalculable stars in the sky. And he believed in God. Then He promised him the land for his seed, but he questioned Him. After he gave the sacrifices, the LORD prophesied the consequences of his doubt, and then expanded the covenant and secured even greater blessings for his seed:

In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates:
(Genesis 15:18)

The True Circumcision

YHWH had chosen Abram as a vessel of grace; he learned about His mercy in the sacrifices that had covered his sin. In years to come, the fear that followed Abram’s doubt would work for his benefit. In reflections of his life, Abraham must have seen that God had given him faith to fear Him that would prompt his obedience on the day when far more would be required.

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When he was ninety-nine, God ordained circumcision for a token of their covenant. He changed his name to *Abraham* and said: *for a father of many nations have I made thee.* (*Gen. 17:5b*) At that time, Ishmael, Abram's son by Hagar the bondservant, along with the other slaves in his household, was circumcised at thirteen years old. From then on, circumcision was made a sign for Abraham's progeny—the token of the covenant between God and him when YHWH exposed his heart and transformed his life.

⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee. ⁸ And 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; and I will be their God. ... ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.

(Genesis 17:7-8, 10-11) [A *token* is a physical sign of an abstract or spiritual reality.]

And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. (Genesis 17:19)

God had made an unbreakable covenant; but more than six hundred years passed till He returned Abram's descendants to the land. In the desert east of the Jordan River, the LORD gave His people the Law through Moses. Though God was a faithful Husband, Israel was an unfaithful wife, breaking that covenant many times. Moses had prophesied a new covenant that would come by another Prophet, and it would replace the one Israel could not keep:

³¹ "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—³² not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of

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Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them,” says the LORD. (Jeremiah 31:31-32 NKJV)
– The Mosaic covenant ended with the arrival of the new one.

After making a covenant of salt with King David, in the last days, God would send the Prophet with the life-giving covenant:

“Should you not know that the LORD God of Israel gave the dominion over Israel to David forever, to him and his sons, by a covenant of salt? (2 Chronicles 13:5 NKJV)

Circumcision depicted the spiritual change that had occurred in Abraham’s heart and is the sign of the covenant God made with him. The most important part of that covenant was not the outward token but his inward change of heart that motivated his faithfulness to obey God. Abram first activated his faith by leaving Haran in obedience to the command. Afterward, Lot and Abram parted company to keep peace. At that time, God promised Abram innumerable sons, like the dust of the earth, and all the land within eyesight. And just about all he saw was dust!

After the war between the kings, by his faith, he gave a tenth of his war spoils to Melchizedek. (See Gen. 14:17-20) Then Abram reminded(?) God that he was still without a son. God reassured him of His promise to him for descendants. At that time, Abram believed in God, and his faith was counted for righteousness even before it was perfected. (See Gen. 15:5-6; Jas. 2:21-23). By honoring the Priest of God with a tithe, Abram evoked a great response!

Abraham begat Isaac with Sarah, even in old age, acting on their faith in the promise. Years later, Abraham perfected his faith, obeying the command to offer his *only son*, Isaac on the altar where he secured his imputed righteousness. Fearing God, he affirmed his *faith* by *acting* on the command while knowing many sons would come from Isaac. As they neared the mountaintop, Isaac and he approached the altar of sacrifice...

⁷ “... The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

⁸ Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together. (Genesis 22:7c-8 NIV)

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God would provide the lamb who would endure the fire, but a ram in the thicket became the substitute for Isaac that day. [The ram, an adult male sheep, is unlike a lamb, its young virgin offspring.] Abraham's prophecy required a lamb, not a ram, as the burnt sacrifice; but the prophet's words would not fail. [Many manuscripts of the Masoretic Text, Samaritan Pentateuch, Septuagint, and Syriac read, *Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns*. The early manuscripts all have, *Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram*.]

Years before, the terror of God had drawn him close to Him. Now by the same fear, he believed and shunned disobedience. He took the first sacrificial steps to obey God: doing what *he did not want to do*, he laid the wood on Isaac and took the tools for the sacrifice into his own hands. The command to offer his son was dreadful, but Abraham had not forgotten the terror of God; thus he died to his own will and obeyed the command; perfecting his faith.

By now, Abraham knew that God would even raise the dead to keep His Word, but God honored him because he feared Him: *And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.* (Gen. 22:11-12) The fear of God prompts us to obey Him when we dread the ramifications of our obedience. The fear of God is the mystery of the martyrs and the prophets.

Why Abram?

By sovereign grace, God made Abraham a father of many— innumerable as stars of the sky or sand of the sea, promising blessings to all nations by his seed. He gave a homeland for his natural descendants since the God of Israel is always faithful to keep His Word, providing for His promises, even if we are not faithful. When in the weakness of sinful flesh, the Law failed to make Israel holy, the Son of God came as a Jew through the seed of David to redeem mankind by His Sacrifice.

When the Word of the LORD came the fourth time, Abram believed in God; even when his body was *as good as dead* and Sarai's, barren and aged, he believed. They both hoped against

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hope, speaking promises, calling each other by name: *Abraham!* or “Father of Many!” and *Sarah!* or, “Princess!” Thus they encouraged each other, keeping the flame of their love alive as time passed.

Despite the unalterable condition of their flesh, they grew in faith, believing that God was able to do what He had promised. Before the Law of Moses, He had endowed grace for Abraham and Sarah to beget a son, electing both the man and his wife with a most important role in the destiny of Israel:

Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. (Hebrews 11:11)

And behold, the word of the LORD *came* to him, saying, “This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.” (Genesis 15:4 NKJV; cf. 2 Sam 7:2)

The promises were to Isaac, conceived by promise, through faith and not his parents’ natural strength. In Eden, God had said a man would be joined to his wife to become *one flesh*; thus, the promise through Abraham’s *body* would come to Sarah whose holy union with her husband completed his own body.

For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. (Ephesians 5:31; also, Genesis 2:24)

Abraham’s descendants experienced the consequences of unbelief, but because their forefather had feared God, He would not destroy them. Why did the Hebrews suffer by Abram’s doubt? As his seed, they too doubted and suffered discipline for their own unbelief, but they also reaped the blessings of his faith.

We remember the faith and perseverance of Job; but God didn’t promise the lineage of the Redeemer through him though Job believed he would see his Redeemer after death. He had seven sons and three daughters—twice! Perfect numbers, too—yet God did not give the promise to Job. Instead, He made the promise for the vast inheritance of children to an old, barren

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couple who would patiently wait for twenty-five years until its fulfillment by the birth of their only son.

He did this to make His power and faithfulness known, revealing the light of His truth to Abraham more completely as the years passed. With the eyes of his heart enlightened, he *endured, as seeing Him who is invisible.* (See Heb. 11:27)

Without a Doubt

Could the weakness of Abram's flesh or the barrenness of Sarah's womb have nullified the promise of God? Of course not, but they were chosen to glorify God in their weaknesses. His faithfulness is on display in Israel, proving to the world that He alone is God. Abraham obeyed YHWH, perfecting His faith, doing his part for the blessings of the covenant. He could look back to see miracles following him; God had taken him by the hand out of Babylon to fulfill His promises for His name's sake.

Covenants require faithfulness on both parts. However when Israel, in the weakness of their flesh, broke the covenant, another covenant would rescue them, and a remnant would be saved for the sake of the promises to Abraham, Jacob's sons, and David. Their unfaithfulness cannot thwart the faithfulness of God.

The same is true for us. He will keep those among us who keep the covenant with Him by walking in the Spirit, not the flesh. But if we spurn Him, He will judge us; *if we deny Him, He will deny us*; nevertheless, we can alter His judgments by repentance. He is faithful to do His part as a Husband to those of the faith of Abraham, even to true Israel. He never destroys His people without a warning but promises a remnant the blessing.

The angel Gabriel made Zacharias silent until the birth of his promised son John, yet God remained faithful to His words, which He fulfilled in their proper time. An unrepentant man proves his unbelief and brings condemnation on himself, but the fear of God tests, proves, and perfects our faith.

¹¹ *It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him:*

¹² *If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us:*

¹³ *If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself.* (2 Timothy 2:11-13)

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God judges unbelief: Abraham's descendants suffered for unbelief, which led to their bondage in Egypt. Had Abram not doubted God, his progeny might have avoided their own unbelief and four hundred years of slavery. God shows Himself sovereign and true. He is faithful to His chosen and foreknown ones, but unbelievers and sinners have no part in His kingdom. Keeping faith to the end, we inherit everlasting life, loving one another.

Those whose lives were disclosed by the Bible are examples for us to learn by. Their steps and their missteps provide us with treasures of understanding and wisdom. If we will believe His words, then the Father will liberate and unify us by His truth.

God has been preparing a family of His own to enjoy His wisdom and love forever. Even in these days of compromise and duplicity, He calls us out, giving us the power to freely choose obedience and resist rebellion. Will we love His Word that leads to life or sin that leads to death? Will we yield to the Spirit and live or to the flesh and die? Apart from Him, we can do nothing. His kingdom is already here, guaranteeing the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth when Messiah returns to reign.

¹⁷ I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸ to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' (Acts 26:17-18 NIV) – Jesus' words to him, as Paul described his conversion to King Agrippa