



## **How to Have a Growing Faith**

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## **Chapter 1: The Man God Started With**

Genesis 11:27—12:4

Apart from Jesus Christ, Abraham is probably the most important person in the Bible. Abraham is a giant in Scripture—his stature is far greater than that of Moses, David, or Paul. These latter three were great men, and God used them in great ways, even giving portions of the Scriptures to us through them. But each of them would have agreed without qualification that Abraham was his father in faith.

In the early chapters of Genesis, we read God's promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations (Genesis 17:4). This was fulfilled physically and spiritually. On the physical side, Abraham became the father of the Jewish people, through whom the Messiah was born; he became the father of the many Arab tribes through his son Ishmael. On the spiritual side, Abraham has become the father of a great host of believers whose numbers are now swelled by Christians of countless tongues and nations.

No one can understand the Old Testament without understanding Abraham, for in many ways the story of redemption begins with God's call to this patriarch. Abraham was the first man chosen by God for a role in the plan of redemption. The story of Abraham contains the first mention in the Bible of God's righteousness imputed to man as the sole means of salvation (Genesis 15:6). Matthew includes the genealogy of Jesus in his Gospel in order to trace the beginnings of salvation back to Abraham (Matthew 1:1). Luke declares that the birth of Jesus occurred in response to God's promise to Abraham (Luke 1:68, 72, 73).

Great sections of the New Testament explain the spiritual significance of Abraham. An entire chapter in Romans refers to God's dealings with Abraham to support the doctrine of justification by grace through faith (chapter 4). Two chapters in Galatians refer to the life of Abraham to prove that salvation is apart from works (chapters 3, 4). One of the longest paragraphs on faith in the Book of Hebrews is devoted to the life of faith lived by this Hebrew patriarch (Hebrews 11:8-19). Faith stands preeminent in the life of Abraham.

### **No Good in Abraham**

It is impossible to understand Abraham's faith without realizing that there was nothing in Abraham that commended him to God. God does not look down from heaven to find a person who has a bit of divine righteousness or a bit of faith and then say, "Oh, isn't it wonderful! I've found somebody with a bit of faith. I think I'll save him." When God looks down from heaven He sees that all men are without faith, and He passes a universal judgment: "They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Romans 3:12). That included Abraham.

This truth is reinforced by another. Abraham came from a family of idol-worshippers, and was undoubtedly an idol-worshiper himself. This truth is clearly stated in at least three places in the Bible.

In the last chapter of the book of Joshua, that aging leader delivers a final spiritual charge to the people of Israel. Joshua begins by reminding them of their pagan past. “Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the river [the River Euphrates] of old, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor; and they served other gods. And I took your father, Abraham, from the other side of the river, and led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his seed, and gave him Isaac. . . . Now, therefore, fear the Lord, and serve Him in sincerity and in truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the river, and in Egypt” (Joshua 24:2, 3, 14). The passage is a black-and-white statement of the fact that Abraham was chosen by God from the midst of a pagan ancestry and that he and Terah had once worshiped false gods.

The same thing is said by Isaiah: “Harken to Me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the Lord; look unto the rock from which ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which ye are digged. Look unto Abraham, your father, and unto Sarah, who bore you” (Isaiah 51:1, 2). The whole thrust of these verses is that there was nothing in the ancestry of the Jewish people that could commend them to God.

The third passage that reveals the truth about Abraham’s ancestry is a story from the life of Abraham’s grandson, Jacob. Jacob was a schemer—even his name means “supplanter”—and his underhandedness made his brother angry enough to want to kill him. Jacob was forced to flee for his life. Where was he to go? Jacob did what many people do when they are cast adrift by life—he went back to his roots. For Jacob, that was in Mesopotamia, the place from which his grandfather Abraham had come. Jacob associated himself with his uncle Laban there. In time, he married two of Laban’s daughters, Leah and Rachel, and came to own a large share of the family’s sheep and cattle.

As time passed, bad feelings arose between Jacob and Laban. Jacob decided to return to the land of Canaan, choosing a moment when Laban was away on business. When Laban returned, his nephew, his daughters, and much of his property were gone. The household gods were also missing. Laban set out in pursuit. When he overtook the band that Jacob was leading, he chided Jacob for this action and accused him of having stolen the idols. A search was made, but the idols were not found. Jacob’s wife, Rachel, who had stolen them, had hidden them in her camel’s saddle. This story in Genesis 31 shows that Abraham’s relatives still owned and cherished idols at least three generations after God had called Abraham out of Mesopotamia.

### **God’s Choice**

It was this Abraham whom God chose to be the father of many nations. But why did God save Abraham? The answer is simply that this was God’s will. In Deuteronomy 7, Moses is telling why God chose Israel to be the nation through which He gave the law and would one day send the Saviour. We read, “The Lord did not set His love upon you, nor choose

you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people. But because the Lord loved you . . .” (verses 7, 8).

Why did God love them? Because He loved them. Why did He choose them? Because He chose them. This is not human logic; it is divine logic. It is the logic of grace.

This is the way God loved Abraham, and the way God loves us. We are like Abraham. There is nothing in us to commend us to God. And yet God loves us. Just as he sought Abraham, He seeks to draw us into fellowship with Himself.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, the apostle tells how Jesus had come to His own people, the Jews, but they had not received Him. And yet some did—both Jews and Gentiles—and John writes that Christ gave to all who believed authority to become the children of God.

As John wrote these words, however, he seemed to know that some would say, “But, you see, God gave them authority to become children of God because they had faith within; it was because they believed.” Lest someone retain a false impression, John adds quickly that these “were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). John knew that no Christian made the first move toward God; he knew that salvation originates in heaven.

This is unpopular teaching, and men and women have always hated it. They hated it when Isaiah reminded them that nothing in their ancestry commended them to God (see Isaiah 51:1, 2). They hated it in Christ’s day. We are told that from the time Jesus began to teach that “no man can come unto Me, except it were given unto him of My Father, . . . many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him” (John 6:65, 66). People hate it when this Gospel is preached in our own century. And yet, in spite of the hatred of men, it is true. No man ever seeks God.

### **God’s Call**

Abraham’s faith was preceded by God’s call. God called him when he was without faith and promised to bless him. As a result of this encounter, Abraham believed God and set out on the journey to Canaan. Actually, the call to Abraham came twice: once when he was in Ur of the Chaldees (Acts 7:2-4), and once, years later, when he was in Haran.

The Bible says, “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 show thee; and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing. And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him” (Genesis 12:1-4). Abraham’s departure from Ur was the first evidence of his faith in God and in God’s promises.

What is faith? Faith is simply belief, and all men have the capacity for it. They demonstrate it every day of their lives. Saving faith is believing God and acting upon that belief.

Abraham had saving faith because he believed God when God revealed Himself, and he acted upon his belief by setting out for Canaan immediately.

There are many mistaken views of faith. One links faith to credulity. This is the view that faith is belief without evidence. But God provided evidence, and He does so overwhelmingly. In Abraham's case the evidence was an appearance of God so striking that it got the patriarch and all his family and possessions moving out of their homeland into a land which they had never seen. In our case, the evidence is the biblical account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the way that God called Abraham, God calls all who become His children. God comes to us when we are hopelessly lost in sin and without knowledge of Him (Ephesians 2:1-7). This is a universal fact in the spiritual biography of Christians. God's call comes first. And our response is nothing more than belief in God and in His promises.

Perhaps someone says, "Well, that may be right theoretically, but I just can't believe."

I disagree. You believe men, don't you? Every time you keep an appointment, sign a contract, ride a bus, read the newspaper, or do anything that involves other people, you show faith in some person, sometimes one whom you have not even met.

In the same way, you can believe God. He is more trustworthy. The Bible says, "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater" (1 John 5:9). What does God ask us to believe? He asks us to believe that we are lost without Him and that He has done everything through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ to save us both for this life and for the life to come.

### **When Faith Is Weak**

Someone may say, "Oh, I am able to believe in the sense that you have been explaining, but my faith is weak. I could become a Christian, but I am afraid that if I do—if I start out with God as Abraham did—I'll falter." Of course you will falter. But salvation depends not on the strength of your faith but on God's overwhelming faithfulness to you.

Abraham faltered. When he was in Ur of the Chaldees, God called Abraham to go to Canaan. Ur was in the Mesopotamian river valley, east of the great Arabian Desert. Canaan was west of the desert and bordered the Mediterranean Sea. To obey God's call, Abraham had to leave Ur, travel north along the great Euphrates River, cross the northern end of the Arabian Desert, and pass down along the Lebanese highlands, entering Canaan from the north. Abraham began the 1,000 mile journey in the best of faith. And yet, at the end of Genesis 11, we find that Abraham stopped at Haran, a little town in Syria hundreds of miles from Ur but still several hundred miles from Canaan.

Abraham stayed at Haran until his father died. When Abraham started once again for Canaan, he was 75 years old. Was Abraham strong in faith? Not at this point in his life. But God's promises were not withdrawn.

From God's point of view, the years in Haran were wasted. Abraham learned no new lessons there. And that happens to us. Times come when we stop and sit down spiritually. We must not sit too long. We must confess the emptiness of such moments, yield to God's repeated calls, and let Him lead us into all the blessings he originally intended.

### **The Second Call**

God had called Abraham once, and he obeyed. Then Abraham disobeyed and stopped at Haran. Years later God came again, calling, "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee; and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing" (Genesis 12:1, 2). God called Abraham a second time, and He calls us a second time also. God always persists in His calling.

This truth is found many places in Scripture. It is found in the story of David. God called David to be the political and moral leader of Israel, but David fell into sin. He stayed in Jerusalem instead of participating in a battle. While in Jerusalem he saw Bathsheba, enticed her, and made love to her. When he learned that she had become pregnant, he attempted to cover his sin by having her husband killed. And yet, God did not cast off King David. Instead he came to him through Nathan to expose his sin and lead him to repentance (2 Samuel 12). God came a second time to David.

When God first called Jonah, He said, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before Me" (Jonah 1:2). Jonah lived in Galilee near Cana, and the way to Nineveh was east. Did Jonah go east? No, Jonah went west! The Bible tells us that Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish, for which he sailed from the Jewish port of Joppa (Jonah 1:3).

At this point in the action, God sent a storm. Jonah ordered himself to be thrown overboard by the sailors. He was swallowed by a great fish and was later vomited out on dry land. He was on the shore, right back where he started from, when God came to him to repeat His original commission, "And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time" (Jonah 3:1). These are the most beautiful words in the entire story: ". . . the Lord came unto Jonah the second time."

So it will be with us. The word of the Lord comes to us once, twice, and, if need be, a hundred or a thousand times. He calls us to follow Him. We are so prone to stop. We have many Harans, Bathshebas, or ships to Tarshish. And yet, God calls again and again.

### **God's Faithfulness**

Where do you stand? It may be that you have never responded to God's call the first time. If God is prodding you to believe, if you feel unhappy as you are, if you are looking for something better in life, if you are questioning the truths of Christianity, this is God's working. You must yield to Him. You must trust Him.

Perhaps you have stopped at some place in your walk with God. Perhaps God has given you a command to do something and you have put it off, a step to take and you have

refused. You prefer to be where you are. The fullness of blessing is never going to come to you until you obey God and do what He has set before you. You will never improve on His instructions.

Perhaps you are one to whom the Lord is now coming a second time. Take great joy in that. Respond to Him. And rejoice that you serve a God who will not abandon the work that He has once set out to accomplish (see Philippians 1:6).

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## **Chapter 2: A Shield for You**

### Genesis 15:1

Once when I was flying over the Gulf of Mexico on a flight from Mexico City to Philadelphia, I saw the great oil-drilling platforms that rise out of the water off our southern coast. The platforms are man-made islands, large enough to house all the men and machinery necessary to drill for oil under the most adverse conditions. The drilling rigs are often lashed by storms. They are buffeted by immense tides. And yet they are secure because they are built upon three great pilings that reach down through many feet of water to bedrock. Three great legs anchor them to a firm foundation.

The Christian life can be compared to such a platform. You are buffeted by life's storms; the forces of Satan often strain against you. Yet you stand secure, not because of your abilities or strength of character, but because you are anchored to the bedrock of the character of God. What anchors you there? Three great spiritual pilings: God's calling, God's faithfulness, and God's power.

God's call does not depend on human merit. God is faithful even when we are unfaithful. And God's power stands behind His call and His promises. He is all-powerful. These three things combine to make certain the salvation and present security of every believer. We do not trust in our own ability to weather the storms and tides of this life, but in God.

In our first study, we discussed the first two of these three divine realities as they are illustrated in the life of Abraham. We looked at God's call and at God's faithfulness. Now we look at God's power. The Bible says, "After these things the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceedingly great reward" (Genesis 15:1). In these words God was teaching Abraham that He had power to do what He had promised.

### **Abraham's Shield**

In order to understand what God was saying to Abraham here, it is necessary to look back over the preceding chapter, for the verse is directly related to what had gone on before. Genesis 15:1 says it was "after these things" that the word of the Lord came unto Abraham. What things? What is in the 14th chapter?

First, there is the story of Abraham's rescue of his nephew Lot from the kings who had defeated Sodom and the cities allied with it. Some time before the battle that this chapter describes, Abraham and Lot had separated, and Lot had gone to live in Sodom.

Sodom was not the place of God's blessing; hence, Lot and his family had problems there. A time came when four kings from distant Mesopotamia began marauding on the eastern edge of Canaan; eventually they came to make war on Sodom and the nearby cities. Sodom's king and his allies were routed, Sodom was overrun, and Lot, his family, and his possessions were captured.

News of the battle came to Abraham. When he heard that Lot had been captured, Abraham set out to rescue the family. The Bible says, "And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained servants . . . and pursued them unto Dan. And he divided his men against them, he and his servants, by night, and smote them, and pursued them unto Hobah . . . and he brought back all the goods, and also brought again his brother, Lot, and his goods, and the women also, and the people" (Genesis 14:14-16).

At this point, Abraham was in great danger. Here were four powerful kings who had laid waste large areas of the land and carried off spoil from many cities. They had presumably spared Abraham only because he was so insignificant and so far away. Now this nobody had attacked them. He had attacked with a small force, but he had won and recovered the spoil. They must have been furious, and Abraham must have been wondering about the consequences of his heroic rescue of his nephew. But while he was wondering, God came to him with a promise of protection, precisely the promise he needed. God said, "Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceedingly great reward."

With such a shield, Abraham was safer than he would have been had he possessed all the power in Canaan. Abraham was shielded by God.

### **Whom Do You Trust?**

Are you shielded as Abraham was? Is God your shield? Do you trust Him? Many men and women trust other things. They trust the government, or their investments, their friends, family, wealth, or popularity. But these things ultimately disappoint the one who trusts them. If you want a real shield, trust God.

Let us think briefly of some of the things against which God promises to shield the one who trusts Him. First, God promises to shield the believer from his enemies. David knew this truth. David had made many enemies. He had welded a nation together, and no one can do that without making enemies. He was threatened by the hostile nations that surrounded Israel, old friends of the former king, factions within his own government, and even by rebels within his immediate family. And yet David knew the protective power of God. He wrote, "The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer, the God of my rock; in Him will I trust: He is my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower, and my refuge, my Saviour" (2 Samuel 22:2, 3).

God will be your shield against enemies. You may say, as some people do, "Oh, I don't have any enemies!" That may be true. If it is, then I suspect that you are not bearing a

very dynamic witness for the Lord Jesus Christ. For the Gospel hardens some hearts as it melts others, and even Jesus had enemies. But if you do have enemies or if you encounter them for the Gospel's sake in days to come, you may be sure that God will be your shield against them.

Second, God promises to shield the believer against Satan. The Bible tells us that our adversary, the devil, "like a roaring lion walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). But it also speaks of deliverance. "Submit yourselves, therefore, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7).

The truth of these verses is illustrated by the story of Job. Job was a righteous man who was severely attacked by Satan. He lost flocks, camels, asses, sons and daughters; yet he did not yield to Satan. The main point of the story is that God had placed a hedge around Job. There was nothing that Satan could do to him until God permitted the hedge to be lowered a little in order to demonstrate Job's character, and God did this only with the full knowledge that Job would triumph and that all that Job had lost would be restored.

God will do that with you also. God will be your shield not only against your enemies, but also against Satan, the greatest enemy of all. There is nothing that Satan will ever be able to do to you that will not come first of all through the will of God who allows it in order to bring about a spiritual victory.

Third, God is our shield against temptation. Paul writes, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not permit you to be tempted above that ye are able, but will, with the temptation, also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

This verse says two things. The first is that no temptation is ever going to come into your life that is too strong for you. God promises that you will only experience temptations that you are able to overcome if you will rest upon Him. Are you tempted by sex, by a chance to be dishonest and escape detection, by a cutthroat way to achieve promotion, by an occasion to gossip? If you are, God knows that, and He knows that you can bear that temptation. You must say, "Lord, I claim Your promise that no temptation that will come to me is beyond my overcoming it. Help me to overcome it through Your strength and show me the way of deliverance." And God will help you overcome it.

The second thing that Paul says about temptation is that God always makes a way to escape, that we may be able to bear it. The trouble with most of us is that we do not look for the way to escape. Instead we become fascinated by the temptation, like the bird fascinated by the snake that is about to devour it, and we fail to see God's deliverance. Do you do that? If so, you need to get out of the habit. Learn to look for God's deliverance. Then your life will go on from strength to strength, and you will realize that God is your shield against temptation also.

Finally, God is our shield against bitterness. In Philippians 1:12, Paul says that the suffering he endured actually served to advance the Gospel. For that he was rejoicing.

A woman in Washington, D.C., told me a similar story. She and her husband had been missionaries to Pakistan but had been sent home suddenly in the midst of one term. They settled in Portsmouth, Virginia, and had not been there long when a gang of youths led by a 14-year old and a 17-year old boy attacked their young son. The boy was struck about the face and neck with a nail-studded rope and was left 90 percent blinded in his left eye and with no central vision in his right eye. About half-normal vision was later restored to his right eye.

In time, the boys involved were tried and sentenced by the courts. Throughout the course of the trial, the parents of the injured boy refused to give way to bitterness or to indulge their feelings of disappointment. They gave a Christian witness to the offenders. The mother told the newspapers, "If necessary, we can live with a physical handicap. But we can't live with bitterness."

She told me of her many opportunities to speak of Christ's love and power, and said that she trusted the Lord to spread the Gospel through such suffering. In the same way, God can be your shield against bitterness.

### **Abraham's Reward**

But divine protection is only half of the story of God's promise to Abraham. God said, "Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield." He also said, "And thy exceedingly great reward." For the meaning of that phrase, turn to the second half of Genesis 14.

When Abraham returned from the battle against the four kings (recorded in the first half of the chapter), he met Melchizedek, the king of Salem. Salem was probably the ancient city of Jerusalem. Melchizedek was a king and a priest of the most high God. We know that Abraham had great respect for him, for he gave Melchizedek tithes of the spoils of the battle. Abraham returned the rest of the spoils to the king of Sodom. Now, in ancient times the spoils of a battle were the warrior's reward. They were a badge of his daring and success. Abraham had every right to keep the spoils that he had brought back from the battle, but he forfeited them. And as he was standing again in Hebron with his servants, just as he was before the battle, God came to him and said, "Fear not, Abram: I am . . . thy exceedingly great reward."

That is a great promise. God Himself was Abraham's reward. And He is your reward also. Do you seek for things? Do you think that your reward consists of things you can earn? or do? or know? If so, you will certainly be disappointed. These things will all pass away. Let God be your reward, for God will never pass away.

### **All That God Has**

To have God as your reward means, first of all, that you share in all that God has. Abraham received many revelations from God during his lifetime, and many of these revelations had a name of God connected with them. Abraham had come to know God as Jehovah, whose name means I Am That I Am. Later he came to know Him as Jehovah-jireh, the God Who provides. In this story he comes to know Him as El Elyon, the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth. It was this God Who promised to be a reward

to Abraham. God possesses heaven and earth, and all that God has He will share with those who trust Him.

He will share it with you, if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible says that we are children of God “and if children, then heirs—heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17). You are God’s heir. There is a great difference between an heir and a joint heir. If you are a single heir, you alone inherit everything. If you are one of four heirs, then you receive only one-fourth of the inheritance. If, however, you are one of four joint heirs, you inherit all, for joint heirs possess the inheritance together. In the same way, all Christians are joint heirs with Christ. All that God has is ours. We possess it jointly. And we shall enter into it one day as we receive our inheritance with Jesus.

### **All That God Is**

To have God as your reward also means that you share in all that God is. You possess it in part even now. There is hardly an attribute of God mentioned in the Bible that is not said in some verse to be ours in Christ Jesus. Is God wisdom? We share that wisdom. Is God holy? We share that holiness. Is God almighty? We share that power. Paul says, “I can do all things through Christ, who strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:13). And he speaks of Jesus “who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30). God Himself is our reward. And having Him we have all.

How do you live your life as a Christian? You can live it in either of two ways. You are already secure in God, more secure even than the oil rigs off the southern coast, for you are anchored in God’s character. And you have a great inheritance. But you can either rest in that or be fearful. You can sit on the platform and watch the storms come and say, “Oh, what if the thing falls over? What will become of me then? What if I prove unfaithful?” Or you can be like Abraham and grow strong in faith, resting in Him Who is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before His presence with exceeding joy. Is your faith like that? If it is not, God can teach you. Then you will grow strong in faith, giving glory to God. You will learn that what God has promised He is able to perform.

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### **Chapter 3: Promises to Live By**

#### Genesis 15 and 17

A number of years ago a person said to me, “I never believe anything just because someone has said it.” But in a few minutes he hurried off to see someone who had promised to meet him in half an hour on the other side of town. Obviously, whether we admit it or not, we often do things because of another’s promise, and would be bad off if we didn’t.

Have you ever noticed how many things in your life depend on someone's promise? You enter into business, get married, buy a piece of property, and do a thousand other things because of someone's promise.

If you are a Christian, you act on the promises of God. Because of His promises you believe that your sins are forgiven, that you possess eternal life, that God hears prayer, that God will provide for you in this life, and that you move toward a blessed existence in the life to come. And you live accordingly. Because promises play such a crucial role in daily life, the nature of God's promises to us is of great importance.

Much in the story of Abraham deals with God's promises. In chapters 15 and 17 of Genesis, God states His promises to Abraham, dramatizes them by a covenant, and confirms them by the institution of a sign. The covenant itself is mentioned 12 times in chapter 17 alone. And the terms of the covenant define the nature of God's promises not only to Abraham but also to the Jewish people and to all who are the children of Abraham by faith.

What is a covenant? It is simply a promise—in this case, a promise made by God to Abraham. "Promise" is really a better word, for the word "covenant" suggests a bargain, and God's covenants are established apart from the bargaining capacities of men. What are the characteristics of God's promises? First, they are unilateral; they are established by God alone. Second, they are eternal and irrevocable. And third, they are always based on grace, because no man deserves the promises that God makes to him. These three points are illustrated in the story of Abraham.

### **A One-Sided Covenant**

Abraham had been bothered for years by the fact that he had never given life to a son. Abraham was an Oriental, and the ability to procreate children was greatly admired in his culture. Children were even considered a sign of favor with God. Abraham wanted a son for this reason. Then, too, a son was connected with the promise. God had promised Abraham that he was to be the father of a great nation, that the nation would inherit Canaan, and that blessing would come to all nations through his posterity (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:7; 17:1-8). Certainly there could be no such inheritance or blessing apart from the birth of a son. God had given the promise. Now Abraham asked for a sign that would ratify it.

We must remember at this point that an oath is confirmed in different ways in different societies. In America, if you are in court and you swear to tell the truth, you confirm your oath by placing your hand on a Bible. In the office of a notary public, you may be asked to confirm an oath by raising your hand. In Muslim lands, an oath is confirmed by reference to the beard of the prophet (Muhammad).

But in Abraham's day an oath was confirmed by a ceremony in which animals were cut into two parts along the backbone and placed in two rows, the rows facing each other across a space marked off between them. The parties to the oath walked together into the

space between the parts and spoke their promises there. The oath was especially sacred because of the shed blood, and violation of it was considered great dishonor.

It was this ceremony which God enacted with Abraham. In the case of Abraham, however, God alone passed between the pieces (Genesis 15:17). Abraham was not allowed to participate. When God came to confirm His covenant with Abraham, He confirmed it all by Himself. That is why Hebrews says, referring to the event, "For when God made promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no greater, He swore by Himself, saying, Surely, blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee. And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise" (Hebrews 6:13-15).

### **God's Presence**

The presence of God in this ceremony was signified by two symbols that were intended to tell Abraham—and us—something of God's nature. First, Abraham saw a "smoking furnace" pass between the animal pieces. In our day we have almost lost the significance of this object, but it was well known in ancient times. It was a small furnace used to purify metal. As the ore was heated within the furnace, the dross separated from the metal and rose to the top. It was the refiner's work to skim off the dross until the metal appeared. He looked into the smoking furnace until he could see his face in the surface of the molten metal. Peter had such a furnace in mind when he wrote of the trial of our faith by fire "being much more precious than of gold that perisheth" (1 Peter 1:7). And Malachi wrote that God "shall sit like a refiner and purifier of silver; and He shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them like gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness" (Malachi 3:3). Malachi meant that God refines His people until He can see His image in them.

God wishes to do the same with you. At time the trial may be painful, and you may resent the fire. But it will be good for you, for God will purify you until you reflect His image.

The second symbol seen by Abraham was a lamp. The story says that a "burning lamp . . . passed between those pieces" (Genesis 15:17). This, too, is a symbol of God's presence. "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). God often presented Himself to His people as light. He appeared as light on Sinai, and the glory transmitted itself to the face of Moses. God appeared in light to Paul on the road to Damascus. Light spoke of the divine presence as the angels appeared to the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem. It was thus that God appeared to Abraham. God alone moved between the pieces and guaranteed the promises.

### **An Eternal Covenant**

The covenant was not only unilateral—it was also eternal. God's promises are always eternal. They are unchangeable. When God says that He will do a thing, He does not change His mind.

This is indicated in two ways by what God did with Abraham. First, God instituted the sacrament of circumcision. This is recorded in Genesis 17. If there is any one outstanding thing that you can say about circumcision, it is that it is permanent. The child knows

nothing of the rite when he is circumcised. He is not able to say, "I am a Jewish baby, and I elect to be circumcised." But the circumcision is done, and the results are permanent. The child may grow up to hate being Jewish. He may leave his home and his homeland. But wherever he may go, the mark of his nationality goes with him. It is a sign of the fact that God establishes His covenants forever.

The second indication that the promises are eternal is this. When God spoke His words of promise concerning the land that Abraham and his seed were to inherit, He used the past tense of the verb to give. If we were speaking, we would say, "And unto your seed I will give this land." God did not speak in this way. He spoke as though the thing were already accomplished. He said, "Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates" (Genesis 15:18).

God also uses the past tense with us. He says that Christ has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, that He has removed our sin. Does that include only the sin that is past? No. It includes the sin that we have not yet committed. That, too, is past history in God's sight. It is wonderful to know that in God's sight our sin has been dealt with forever, and that His promise of forgiveness is eternal.

### **God's Promises to Israel**

Scripture everywhere testifies to the past and future fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham on behalf of His people.

About 400 years passed after the death of the patriarch Abraham, and the people of Israel were in bondage. They were in Egypt, several millions of them. But God raised up Moses and worked through him to effect a supernatural deliverance. Even in Egypt, God did not cast off His people.

The nation came to Sinai. Here they received the Law and, with it, the institution of the great system of sacrifices intended to reveal the way to God when the Law of God was broken. The Law established true worship, outlawed idolatry, instituted the Sabbath Day of rest, and outlined the duties of a man regarding his neighbor. But even as the Law was being given, the people were breaking almost every one of the commandments. And yet God did not cast off His people.

The time came when the Promised Land stretched before them, and spies went out to take the measure of the country. The report came back. "The land is prosperous. It is a land of milk and honey. But there are giants, and we cannot take it." The people were frightened, and they refused to go forward. Their lack of trust brought judgment. There followed 40 years of wandering in the desert, and yet the time came when God again brought the people to the border of the land of Canaan. God did not cast off His people.

Israel entered Canaan, and for a while God ruled through judges. When the people disobeyed Him and turned to other gods, He brought judgment and they were ruled by the surrounding hostile nations. When they returned to Him, the times of blessing were restored. Nehemiah recounts this period of their history with all its judgments and concludes, "Nevertheless, for Thy great mercies' sake Thou didst not utterly consume

them, nor forsake them; for Thou art a gracious and merciful God” (Nehemiah 9:31). God did not cast His people off.

In time Israel wanted a king to rule over them instead of God. In His displeasure, God gave them King Saul—and all the problems that came with his reign. And yet, in His grace, God later gave them David, and through him established a line from which the Messiah came. God did not cast off His people.

We turn to Revelation 14 and see God’s faithfulness projected to the final days of world history. Here are 144,000 Jewish Christians—12,000 from each of Israel’s tribes—saved during the final period of persecution on earth. These stand together with the Gentile believers and sing praises to God and to the Lamb. God will not cast off His people.

### **The Covenant of Grace**

Just as God made a covenant with Abraham and kept it through the years of history, so He has made a covenant with all those who are Christians. He will keep that covenant through all the years of our lives on this earth and throughout eternity. Men are unfaithful. Human beings have nothing to commend themselves to God. If God had not come unilaterally to establish His covenant, none would have believed. If God had not made His covenant eternal, as He is eternal, all would fall away and be lost, for all are variable. If His covenant had not been entirely by grace, none would have heard the promises, for no man deserves them.

But the sovereign, eternal, gracious God did come to establish his covenant, and He confirmed it not with the blood of animals but with the blood of His own Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. During the three hours of darkness when Jesus hung upon the cross, God moved in the darkness to ratify the covenant. And because of Christ’s death, we shall never perish—neither shall any man snatch us out of His hand.

A Christian should never let anyone tell him that his security comes from the strength of his faith, his faithfulness in attending church, his baptism, reading the Bible, or whatever it may be. If a Christian fails to do these things, he will suffer for it, and God may subject him to discipline. But salvation does not depend on these. It depends upon God, who in His great grace has established an eternal and unchangeable covenant with His people.

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## **Chapter 4: The Steps of Faith**

Genesis 17 and 22

Several years ago when I was in France I climbed a mountain near the little town of Mans in the province of Isere. It really was not much of a mountain—more like a high hill in the foothills of the Alps—but it was fairly steep, especially near the top. It was a good mountain for a beginner to learn on.

The Protestants in the area called the mountain Calvin's Bonnet because it looked like a hat, rather flat on the bottom where the brim would be and rising steeply to a large flat surface on the mountaintop.

Early in the morning my friends and I took our first steps along the road that gradually led up into the mountain. By mid-morning the way had become steeper. As we drew near the summit the rise became abrupt, and at last we had to work our way up the side of a precipice. Of course, once we reached the top, the view of the higher Alps was splendid, and we congratulated ourselves on our efforts.

### **The Upward Call**

The walk of faith is like that. The steps of faith lead uphill but they begin gradually because our faith starts small. At first the incline is gradual; the climb is easy. But God has arranged the route so that the way becomes harder and the faith of the climber is inevitably strengthened with each step of his journey. We may wish that the way were less difficult. But it is only through the difficult climbing that anyone reaches the heights. And only from the peak can we see the panorama of God's best plans for us and His purposes in history.

That is what happened to Abraham. At first Abraham's faith was a very simple thing; it meant only believing in God's call and doing what God told him to do (Genesis 12:1). But God soon led him to higher ground; he was asked to believe that God could give him a son when he was past the age of engendering children and Sarah was past the years of fertility (Genesis 17:16, 17). At this point, faith in God meant believing that God was able to perform a miracle. Abraham believed that God could do it, and he was not disappointed. In that step Abraham learned to recognize God as the God of the impossible. And he grew strong in faith, giving God the glory.

### **God of the Impossible**

Apart from the appearance of God to Abraham first in Ur of the Chaldees and later in Haran, nothing in the story of Abraham before chapter 17 of Genesis has anything to do with the miraculous. With chapter 17, this changes. Abraham was 86 years old when his concern for a son had last been shared with God. Abraham was now 99 years old (verse 1). At this point Abraham was hoping that Ishmael, who had been born in his old age of a slave girl, might be blessed as the son of God's promise (verse 18).

The natural birth of Ishmael was not of God's doing, however, and in time God came again to Abraham. He reiterated the promise of a son through Sarah: "Behold, My covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee" (Genesis 17:4-6). This was the promise, and its fulfillment now required a miracle.

What did Abraham do? The Bible tells us that Abraham "was strong in faith, giving glory to God" and was "fully persuaded that, what He had promised, He was able also to perform"

(Romans 4:20, 21). In the following year Sarah gave birth to Isaac, who was the son of promise and an ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you have faith like that? A God like that? The God we worship is the God of Abraham, and this God works in men to bring forth faith like Abraham's. This God brings life out of death, love out of hate, peace out of turmoil, joy out of misery, praise out of cursing, and miracles to those who trust Him. In our day He does so through Jesus Christ Who is the focal point and ultimate heir of the promises.

The final step on the path of Abraham's faith appears in Genesis 22. God put Abraham to a severe test, and Abraham learned something about God's dealings with men that he would have learned in no other way. God said, "Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of" (Genesis 22:2). Abraham obeyed God. I believe that through this test Abraham learned something about the coming of Jesus Christ and entered into the very mind of his heavenly Father.

### **Faith in Crisis**

The test that came to Abraham was, first of all, a test of his devotion to God. Was God to be everything to Abraham? Or was something else—perhaps even God's gift of Isaac—to come between them?

We must remember that Abraham was 86 years old when he had his first son by Hagar. He was 100 years old when Sarah at last gave birth to Isaac. Now Isaac had become a young man, perhaps 15 years of age, and Abraham was probably about 115 years old. Abraham had loved this son from birth, as any father would. This love had grown strong over the years in which Abraham had seen Isaac grow to young manhood. He loved him not only because he was the son of his old age, the result of a miracle, but also because he was the son of the promise.

We can only begin to imagine the depth of the struggle in Abraham's heart during the long night in which he wrestled with the thought of losing Isaac. But whatever the struggle was, and however deep it was, it was all over by the following morning. The Abraham that emerged in the morning was an Abraham committed to obedience. The story says, "And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and cut the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him" (Genesis 22:3). Abraham had not put the gift ahead of the Giver.

But the test was not only a test of Abraham's devotion to God; it was also a test of his spiritual perception. Think of the things Abraham had learned in the years before Isaac's birth. At one time he had been tempted to think that God would not keep His promises and that a household servant would be his legal heir (Genesis 15:2). But God had taught him that the blessing would not come through the household servant. Abraham later wanted to substitute Ishmael, the son of Hagar, for Isaac, before Isaac was born (Genesis 17:18). But God had taught him that the blessing would not come through the son of the Egyptian

slave girl. God had taught Abraham that the blessing was to come through Isaac, and now God had asked the patriarch to kill Isaac.

We can imagine the troubled reasoning that must have stirred the mind of Abraham in the dark hours of that desert evening. He must have thought something like this: "I know that Isaac is the son of God's promise, and God has shown me time and again that He will not send the blessing through another. And yet, this same God tells me to sacrifice him, to put him to death. How can this be? If I put him to death, as God has commanded, how can God fulfill His promise? How can God do it?"

The puzzle was real. But then, as Abraham wrestled with this supreme test of God's logic, it must have occurred to him (perhaps as the sun was rising) that the God who had done a miracle in bringing about Isaac's birth was also capable of doing a miracle in bringing him back from the dead. This was the solution that his aching heart discovered during the long desert night. And as Abraham started for the mountain in the morning, he must have been saying quietly to himself, "Come on, boy, we are going to see a miracle. God has asked me to sacrifice you on Mount Moriah. But if God is going to be faithful to His promise, He is going to have to raise you up again from the dead. We are going to see a resurrection."

In at least two places the Bible reveals that this is the way it happened. The first is in the story itself. Abraham had come to the foot of the mountain with the boy, and he was ready to go on without the young men who were with him. As he took the kindling and Isaac and prepared to climb the mountain, Abraham said to the others, "Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you" (Genesis 22:5). Think of that: and come again to you. Who would come? Abraham and Isaac! And what does that mean? It means that although Abraham believed that he was going to perform the sacrifice, he also believed that God was going to perform a resurrection and that he would be able to come back down the mountain with his boy.

The second proof is Hebrews 11:17-19, which is the full New Testament commentary on the incident: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, In Isaac shall thy seed be called; accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which also he received him in a figure." What does that mean? It means that Abraham looked for a resurrection. And in this expectation he triumphed. Once again Abraham grew strong in faith toward God.

### **The Real Resurrection**

The story of Abraham's struggle does not exhaust the narrative, for all that we have seen up to this point is only what Abraham learned before he ascended Mount Moriah. The climax of the story—and the greatest lesson—comes upon the mountain. The Jewish people have a proverb that says, "In the mountain the Lord will provide." I believe that on the mountain Abraham learned that God would one day provide His Son to die for man's salvation.

The first piece of evidence for this conclusion is found in John 8:56. In that verse Jesus speaks of the knowledge of Himself possessed by Abraham. He says, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad." What is intended in this word see? On this point commentators on the Gospel of John have long been divided. Some see it as a knowledge of Christ that Abraham had in Christ's day (since Abraham was alive in paradise). Others see it as a vision of Christ's coming that Abraham had in his own day, some 2,000 years before the actual birth of Jesus. To me there is no question but that the latter interpretation is the correct one. For the context of the verse requires the point, not that Abraham existed after death, but that Christ was preexistent. The argument is that He must have existed in the Old Testament to give a revelation of Himself to Abraham.

If this is true, however, we must ask ourselves to what period of Abraham's life the vision spoken of by Jesus refers. The only part of Abraham's life recorded in the Old Testament to which it can possibly refer is the part we are now studying. For only this could be a vehicle to reveal Christ's coming to earth, His death, and His resurrection.

The second line of evidence that Abraham received a revelation of Christ's coming and death lies in the name of God that embodied what Abraham learned on the mountain. As we saw in an earlier study, God had previously revealed Himself to Abraham by different names. The first was Jehovah, which means I Am That I Am (Genesis 12:1). As Abraham had given titles to Melchizedek, he had learned the name El Elyon (Genesis 14:19). This means the most high God, and it identifies God as the possessor of heaven and earth. When Abraham learned that God was able to do that which seemed impossible to men, as he did at the birth of Isaac, he came to know God as El Shaddai, which means God Almighty (Genesis 17:1). Now he learned that God was also Jehovah-jireh, the God Who provides (Genesis 22:14). This name was a true revelation of God's character. And it was not exhausted in this one incident. The name points to the fact that the God Who would provide a ram as a substitute for the sacrifice of Isaac would also provide a substitute for the death of all men through Jesus Christ.

Another verse points to this same conclusion. In the letter to the Galatians, where Paul is arguing that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ alone, he quotes Genesis 22:18 to prove that the blessing of Abraham was to come, not through Israel as a whole, but through the Messiah Who was Abraham's seed: "And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." (See Galatians 3:8, 16.) But when was this promise given? Not in Ur of the Chaldees, nor in Haran, nor in connection with the birth of Isaac, but after the experience on the mountain when the patriarch almost sacrificed his son. Certainly the experience itself, the name of God, and the promise all point to the sacrifice that God would make of Jesus.

Actually, all this is dramatized in the story itself. And we cannot doubt that God allowed it to happen in this way as an illustration of what would happen 2,000 years later when God would give His Son on Calvary. Look at what happened. As Abraham started out early in the morning, Isaac was as good as dead, for Abraham was determined to obey the Lord's commandment. For three days they traveled on the way to Mount Moriah—the exact length of time that passed between the death of Jesus and His Easter resurrection. Abraham and the boy reached the mountain. The climb was made. Isaac was bound, and

Abraham raised his hand to plunge the knife into his son. It was only at this point that God intervened to provide a substitute, a ram caught in the bushes, and to provide a figure of a far greater and more literal resurrection.

Do you see the parallel? Abraham was only called upon to offer his son. But when the time came for God to offer His Son on Calvary, the hand that was poised above Him fell. God put His own Son to death. Jesus endured the full sufferings of death. For three days He lay in the tomb. And then God effected the resurrection and initiated Christ's triumphs. All this was dramatized for Abraham. And through it he learned to look for Christ's coming. Through his suffering, Abraham learned of God's suffering. He learned what it meant for God to give His Son on Calvary.

### **Up from the Lowlands**

We have reached the end of the story of Abraham, having followed him through a lifetime of leaning to walk by faith. His faith grew by stages, and there is an application in at least one of these stages for everyone. Whatever your position in the life of faith, you are at one point of this journey.

Perhaps you are still in Ur of the Chaldees spiritually. If you are, then God is not yet asking you to believe in His power to do the impossible or to learn anything about His ways through suffering. What God is asking you to believe is that you must leave all that you have and all that you are and walk the path he shows you. This path leads first to Jesus. God wants you to leave your sin, your past, your own planning for your life, even your good opinions of yourself, and follow Jesus (Acts 2:37, 38; 16:30, 31). He died for you. He lives for you. You must believe in Him. Any journey begins with the first step, and this is the first step of faith.

Perhaps you are at the point that Abraham had reached when he was asked to believe that God could do the impossible. God has asked you to move in a direction in which you see nothing but a high brick wall. It may be a trait of character that you are unable to overcome by yourself. It may be a call to be a missionary or to witness to someone that you feel you will never be able to talk to. It may be a call to a life of service. It may mean that you must forego marriage. It may mean submission to seemingly unthinkable circumstances. If you are in that position, then you must learn that the God Who has called you is a God Who can do the impossible. You must trust Him to remove the wall in your life. And you must step forward in faith, through the wall if necessary, knowing that He is able to keep those who trust Him. (Philippians 4:13).

Perhaps you have come to the point that Abraham reached in the last days of his earthly life. God had given him a test that involved much personal suffering, but God had a purpose in that suffering. Perhaps He is doing that with you. If He is, you should take courage in the fact that He will use it to teach you something about Himself and about His purposes in history (Romans 8:28).

Do you know testing where your children are concerned? Have you tried to bring them up in the Lord, only to see them go their own way? That involves suffering. But through it you

may learn what God feels when we are disobedient children. The Bible says, “As a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him” (Psalm 103:13).

Have you a burden for the lost, someone in your family or among your neighbors? Perhaps God would have you learn what Jesus felt when He cried, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them who are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” (Matthew 23:37).

Perhaps you have known abuse for the Gospel’s sake—personal, vindictive, unjust abuse—by your family, your friends, or those with whom you work. God may want you to go through this experience in order to learn about His love and about the depths of His compassion in the face of the contradiction of sinners. “The Lord is gracious, and full of compassion, slow to anger, and of great mercy” (Psalm 145:8). If God has led you this far in the journey of faith, you have begun to scale the heights and to learn that the knowledge of God is far more precious than any material blessing. You are becoming a true friend of God, as Abraham was. And you will not want to exchange the heights of this faith for the lowlands.

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### **About the author**

James Montgomery Boice (1938-2000) was the pastor of Philadelphia’s historic Tenth Presbyterian Church (1968-2000). He founded the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals (Alliance) in 1994. The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals is a broad coalition of evangelical Christians from various denominations. The purpose of the Alliance’s existence is to call the Church, amidst a dying culture, to repent of its worldliness, to recover and confess the truth of God’s Word as did the reformers, and to see that truth embodied in doctrine, worship, and life. In 1996 the Alliance met and wrote the Cambridge Declaration. He served as an assistant editor of *Christianity Today* in Washington, D.C., from 1966-1968, and as editor of *Eternity* from 1985-1989. James Montgomery Boice’s Bible teaching continues on The Bible Study Hour radio and internet program, preparing you to think and act biblically

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### **About the Alliance**

The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals is a confessional coalition that seeks a Reformed awakening in today’s Church and works through media, events, and publishing. Media include broadcasting: ***The Bible Study Hour*** with James Boice, ***Every Last Word*** featuring Philip Ryken, and ***Dr. Barnhouse & the Bible*** with Donald Barnhouse. Events include the **Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology**, regional conferences,

and **Reformation Societies** who continue to encourage, embolden, and equip church leaders. *reformation21* is our online magazine, ***Think and Act Biblically*** and ***Making God's Word Plain***, our online daily devotionals, **MatthewHenry.org**, Alliance Books, as well as CD and MP3 resources.

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