

Faithfulness Moving Forward, Part 2

A Sermon on Genesis 15

by Dr. Richard Gamble

At Genesis 15: 6, the Bible for the first time specifically states the relationship between faith and justification. Our Bibles say that “he believed in Jehovah.” This is correct, but could be better translated “he developed assurance in Jehovah.” The best translation for that sentence is “he personally developed assurance in the personal Yahweh.” The meaning of this is an imputed faith, and the best theological interpretation of the passage is found in Romans 4:3ff.: “For what do the scriptures say? But Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness. But the wages of the one who works are not accounted as grace but as owed.” This is certainly not the first time that Abram’s faith was evident. In Genesis 14: 21-23 Abram refused to take any spoils from the King of Sodom when he saved Lot. This refusal demonstrates a faith in God to bless him. This is evidence of a supernatural faith. Of course, his obedience to the command to go to a Promised Land also evidences faith.

Abram’s faith is further established at the time of the theophany (Gen. 15:12). This is the last fearful theophany. The meaning of the strange account is clear: God promises to be dismembered if he is unfaithful to Abram.

By the end of this chapter, we can accurately summarize the Old Testament view of faith. There are two parts to faith: a dependence on the supernatural power and grace of God, and a projection to the heavenly world. The first we term imputation. That will be demonstrated when Ishmael is not permitted to receive the inheritance and when Abram is commanded to sacrifice Isaac. The idea of projection to the heavenly world is made vividly evident in the denial of a physical Promised Land. The best means for interpreting all of the Old Testament material is to turn to the definitive interpretation of the New Testament. That is found in Hebrews 11: 9f. To summarize the Old Testament teaching in light of the New Testament, it is safe to say that faith is a “desire for communion with God” (cf. especially the above translation of Gen. 15:6).

Throughout the Old Testament, faith is exactly what we have observed it to be so far. To demonstrate the point, if a good summary of faith is “desire for communion with God,” then hear these great passages of faith: “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?” (Ps. 42:1-2); “Whom have I in heaven but you? And besides you, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:25-26). This desire is so personal; it

is described metaphorically as a desire for physical contact. The psalmist wants bodily contact with God (compare Pss. 61; 17:8; 36:7)¹

Abraham's Faith/Our Faith

Abraham's faith is cited repeatedly in the New Testament, and held up as a model for our Christian faith (Rom. 4; Gal. 3; Heb. 11; Jas. 2). In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Scriptures encourage and exhort us to emulate Abraham's faith, even calling him the father of all who have faith in Christ (Rom. 4:11-12).

Conclusion

I confess that I hardly ever seem to have Abram's faith. I know that I am justified by Christ through faith. But I do not often see heaven's door wide open in my sight. Abraham, a man of the Old Testament, could see it better than I, a man of the New Testament. That vision of being united to Christ is as important to faith as our being declared righteous. This is what I want for myself, and I trust you want too:

An attraction for heaven because it is *real* to us. Although pilgrims, we are not separated from the city of God. The land of promise is in close view. Abram breathed the air of Canaan and was refreshed. We too are given tastes of the power of the world to come. All that might sound pious, but what does it mean, how can we make it our own? Our hope for that glorious city can make the future a present reality. Hope can destroy time and seize heaven as it well be. We do it when we think of our justification, our righteousness before God. No one here is righteous. We are sinners, yet we pray and expect God to hear us. We worship and expect God to be pleased. But he is not pleased with sinners. In practice, we make our future justification present now. We need to do this in terms of our desire for communion with God, or our union with Christ.

Here is how it works: Remember that heaven is right now undergoing a transformation — the people of God are being gathered in each day from the four corners of the earth. Knowing that heaven is being built following God's timetable, we are not impatient that it is not finished for us. This hope also makes that future reality supply strength for the present. Can we close our eyes and see the construction of the city? The foundations are being quietly laid; the walls are rising steadily. It will soon be finished in its golden glory. We will see it someday, and when we do we will live in this crowning product of the work of God for his bride the church.

¹ Vos, *Grace and Glory* 172-175.