

Abraham – Heir of the World

Genesis chapter 12 describes how that the patriarch Abraham (or Abram as he was then) was called upon to leave his home and family, to go to an unknown land:

“Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew 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 ...” (Gen. 12:1-2).

From these words, we can see that there were certain promises that could only be fulfilled if Abraham made the decision to leave his own land and people behind. He was also called upon to forsake the family idols, hence his natural seed were later told: “Now therefore fear Yahweh, and serve him in sincerity and truth: and put away *the gods which your fathers served* on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye Yahweh” (Josh. 24:14). Leaving behind the idolatry of Ur, Abraham was to have a new start in a new land, devoted to the worship of Yahweh alone.

The Genesis record continues to describe how that when Abraham went into the land, a certain promise was made:

“Yahweh appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto Yahweh, who appeared unto him” (Gen. 12:7).

This is the first promise that Abraham received regarding possession of the land. Although when he left Ur of the Chaldees, a sevenfold promise was made to him, this is the first time the land was promised – but here, it is not promised to Abraham himself, but to his seed: “unto *thy seed* will I give this land”. There are many principles encapsulated in these words, not least that it was both a promise that he would have “seed”, and also that the seed would be given that land that Abraham saw.

After separating from Lot, further promises were made concerning the land:

“Yahweh said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: for all the land that thou seest, *to thee will I give it*, and to thy seed for ever ...” (Gen. 13:15).

Here, Abraham is finally promised the land which he now resided in. There is an important point here: as we have already mentioned above, the land was promised to Abraham’s seed first, then Abraham second. This means that Abraham could not take possession of the land, until his seed possessed it first. We are left in no doubt as to who the promised Seed was, for the Apostle informs us in no uncertain terms: “Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to thy seeds, as of many, but as of one, And to thy seed *which is Christ*” (Gal. 3:16). Christ must take his possession in order that Abraham can take his, for it was promised to him first. But Christ has not yet taken his share in the promises. During his mortal ministry, he had no permanent dwelling place as he said: “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the son of man hath not where to lay his head” (Mat. 8:20).

Israel, as the natural descendants of Abraham lived in the land according to Law: the Law given by the hand of Moses. If they obeyed the Law, they would be permitted to remain in the land. But if they disobeyed it, they would be cast out – which is, of course, what happened to them. But Abraham was not to take possession of the land by Law, but by promise, and by belief/faith in that promise. So the apostle continues:

“for if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise: but God gave it to Abraham by promise. Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator” (Gal. 3:18-19).

The Law then, was a temporary arrangement put in place until the coming of Messiah, as the Seed of promise. It was added because of sin, and was designed to regulate the behaviour of those who lived under it. It's entire system of sacrifice pointed forward to the Lord Jesus Christ. He was "the good things to come", being the substance of all the shadowy institution of the Law (Heb. 10:1). But when he came, even he did not take up his inheritance. The time was not right, as his people rejected him and sought his destruction. The resurrection of the faithful Abraham was necessary for him to be given his portion, but the time had not yet come. We, two thousand years later, still wait for our Redeemer to take his inheritance, but are confident that all things will work out according to the Divine Schedule.

Genesis 13 describes what Abraham was to do in response to the promises: "Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it: for I will give it unto thee" (Gen. 13:17). And that is what Abraham spent the rest of his life doing: walking through the land in the confident anticipation that in due time it would be given to him. Interestingly, believers of the Gospel message are to have the faith of Abraham in the resurrection from the dead. We will look at this shortly, but for now we will just notice one aspect. Romans 4 describes those who would be adopted as Abraham's seed and speaks of Abraham as the father of the faithful and "the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised" (Rom. 4:12). The steps of Abraham's faith were all over the land: he spent his entire life as a stranger and sojourner walking through it. We, if we wish to be considered to be part of his Seed, must have that same faith. Our walk in life must be after the steps of Abraham: the spirit of being strangers and sojourners, looking to the day when the promise will be fulfilled.

Genesis chapter 15 sets forth a fundamental principle by which sinners can become righteous. After speaking of how Abraham's seed would develop into a great multitude, we read: "And he believed in Yahweh; and he counted it to him for righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Although it seems that Abraham was formerly an idolater (it would appear from Josh. 24 cited above), and was a sinner, his faith was imputed as righteousness. The blessings which Yahweh spoke to Abraham were promised by grace, not by Law:

"... if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the Scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him as righteousness..." (Rom. 4:2-3).

Neither Abraham, nor any other man can be considered righteous by works of obedience. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (except, of course, Messiah himself). But if they believe, and display the same faith that Abraham, they can be counted as righteous, even as he.

If we were to ask the question: "of all that Abraham did, was were those things that really demonstrated his faith?" We would probably get the answer, "Firstly leaving his home and family, and secondly offering up Isaac as a sacrifice". Looking at this second aspect, Genesis chapter 22 records how God tested Abraham's faith, by calling upon him to offer up Isaac his son as a sacrifice. The details are well-known to us, particularly the way in which the Sacrifice of Christ is foreshadowed, but there are just a few points I'd like to focus on. The Genesis narrative describes how that God required Abraham to go to Moriah, and offer up Isaac as a burnt offering. Interestingly, when they arrived at Moriah, "Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass: and I *and the lad* will go yonder to worship, *and come again to you*" (Gen. 22:5). The faith of Abraham was so great that he expected that both he and his son would survive the experience, and would return back to the camp in safety. Hebrews 11 tells us about his faith: he expected to slay Isaac, but then his son would be resurrected and restored to life. So we read: "by faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son ... accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure" (Heb. 11:17-19).

Isaac is referred to here as “his *only begotten* son”. This alludes to the Genesis narrative, which states: “Take now thy son, *thine only son* Isaac ...” (Gen. 22:2). In actual fact, Abraham already had another son, Ishmael, the son of his handmaid. Why then, is Isaac described as Abraham’s “only begotten son?” It would appear that there is an underlying principle here, expounded to us by the Apostle:

“... For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: *neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children:* but In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed” (Rom. 9:6-8).

Natural birth alone does not qualify a man to be part of Abraham’s seed. Only those who are the children of promise, and who walk in the steps of Abraham’s faith are counted. Ishmael was a man of the flesh, hence he is not counted, and Isaac is regarded as being Abraham’s only begotten Son.

Although Abraham was justified by faith, that faith had to be displayed in works. Accordingly, it is written:

“but wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered up Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? 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. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, not by faith only” (Jas. 2:20-24).

Here is a point that many seem to be confused about. We are not justified by works, although works are necessary – an apparent paradox with just a surface reading. The truth of the matter is that we are justified by faith, and that faith needs to be demonstrated through action. Abraham’s action in offering up Isaac was because of his faith in the resurrection. Demonstrating his faith, righteousness was imputed to him, and he was called the “Friend of God” as a consequence.

As we have seen, the faith that Abraham had, was a faith in life out of death. And that twofold: receiving up Isaac from the dead by a figure, but also the emergence of life from his and Sarah’s impotent bodies. And this is brought to bear with regard to our faith:

“being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body *now dead*, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet *the deadness* of Sarah’s womb. He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief: but was strong in faith, giving glory to God. And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him, but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that *raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead ...*” (Rom. 4:19-24).

Here is the point: Abraham trusted in life out of death on two counts, and we trust in the resurrection of Abraham’s greater Seed: again, life out of death. We share the faith of Abraham both in intensity, and in principle. Indeed, we are confident that what Yahweh is able to perform that which He has promised, and so give glory to Him.

Romans chapter 4 describes Abraham and the promises made to him thus:

“For *the promise* that he should be *the heir of the world* was not to Abraham or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith ...” (Rom. 4:13).

Abraham is, therefore the “heir of the world”, according to “the promise”. The difficulty arises when we examine the Genesis account, for this description does not occur there. Nowhere in the Old Testament do we find this description of Abraham, so the question is, “How is it that he is “heir of the world” by promise?”

One solution that presents itself, is that the land that Abraham will be given will become the capital of the world. And that if he is in possession of the world's capital, then effectively he will be the heir of the world. We know that Jerusalem and the land promised to Abraham will be the earth's centre of administration, teaching and worship from Isaiah's prophecy:

“... the mountain of Yahweh's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills: and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh, to the house of the God of Jacob: and **he will teach us of his ways**, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the Law, and the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem. **And he shall judge among the nations**, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isa. 2:2-4).

“Yahweh's house” described here, shall be a “house of prayer for all people” (Isa. 56:7) as nations will go forth to that place to keep the feast of tabernacles (Zech. 14:16) and to pay homage to the Great King who shall be seated there upon the ancient Davidic seat of power.

When we consider such glorious pictures of the kingdom as those presented by the prophet Isaiah, we should try to picture ourselves as actually being there. It is the Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom (Lu. 12:32), and it should be ours to consider what life will be like then. Christ will not be there alone: there will be with him a whole multitude which no man can number, all of whom will constitute the “seed” of promise. Hence Paul taught the Galatians:

“ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you has have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ ... ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's **then are ye Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise**” (Gal. 3:29).

Again, there is no reference in “the promise” to the term “heirs” for the believers. But the same principle holds true: possessing the capital of the new world, they will be heirs of the world like Abraham himself. Thus Messiah described how that “the meek shall inherit the earth” (Mat. 5:5). They shall be with the great Patriarch being his seed through faith in Messiah, and his resurrection from the dead.

Interestingly, the multitude of the faithful are described in the Apocalypse in these words:

“he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful” (Rev. 17:14).

What is of particular interest here, is that the only man in Scripture that these words are applied to is Abraham! He is “called” in Genesis 12, and Isaiah 51:2. He is “chosen” in Nehemiah 9:7, and he is “faithful” in Romans 4. All of these qualities are only applied to Abraham, and so they are also the characteristics of his spiritual “seed” who share his faith.

The overriding principle regarding Abraham is that of justification by faith. Romans chapter 4 deals with this aspect in some considerable detail: we have just covered a few points. But the basic principle is that we cannot achieve righteousness by ourselves, it has to be imputed to, or given to us by the One in whose blood we wash our symbolic garments (Rev. 7:14) to make them white. We long for the day which Messiah shall come again: not that we feel righteous about our selves to sufficiently warrant his favour, but that rather because of our faith that we seek to apply to our daily lives, we shall be given righteousness:

“who shall ascend into the hill of Yahweh? Or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully. **He shall receive** the blessing from Yahweh, and **righteousness** from the God of his salvation” (Psa 24:3-5).

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