

HOW GOD STRENGTHENS OUR FAITH

GENESIS 15:7-21

It is the will of God that you live a life of faith. He has and He will make provisions so that a life of faith becomes a possibility for you. We are utilizing the life Abram for our study of what is involved in a life of faith.

We learn from Abram that questions and faith are not inconsistent with each other. There are times when a person who has genuine faith may still have some questions. Just after Moses called attention to Abram's faith and the resulting acceptance before God, he records a serious question on the part of Abram.

Just after the great statement about imputed righteousness, God spoke to Abram again, "I am the Lord who brought you out of the Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." In the first instance Abram's concern had been about a son, but when he believed God concerning the son, another problem appeared. God gave him the assurance that he would be the heir to the whole of the land of Canaan. When God made this statement, Abram wondered how it might happen. At that point in his life he still did not own one inch of the land of Canaan. He was strictly a sojourner in that land. He expressed his concern to the Lord like this, "Oh, sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" This was not a skeptical question on the part of Abram. If it had been skeptical then God would have made a different kind of response. He did not doubt that God could give him the land of Canaan as an

inheritance; he was simply wondering how God might do it. He wanted some insight into the ways of the Lord concerning this. His query was rather an expression of concern and a desire to know more.

God's response stands in contrast to His later response to Zechariah the father of John the Baptist, when he asked God a similar question. Zechariah's question was full of skepticism. He just didn't believe it was possible for someone as old as Elizabeth to conceive and to bear a child. God responded to his skepticism by imposing dumbness upon him for an extended period of time. In fact he suffered from the inability to speak until Elizabeth gave birth to John the Baptist. No such penalty was imposed upon Abram. Rather God responded by giving to Abram what he wanted – assistance for his faith. God worked in a way to enable Abram to strengthen his faith.

If you are having difficulty maintaining a life of faith in the midst of this skeptical world, you might learn something from how God dealt with Abram. Instead of just struggling with your skepticism it will be helpful to you to be honest with God and to express to Him the desire of your heart to know more so you can believe more. Let's consider together how God responded and the assistance that He gave.

I. GOD GIVES THE MANIFESTATION OF HIS PRESENCE TO STRENGTHEN FAITH.

Someone said that it's almost like there is a break in the text when you move from the question of Abram to the response that God made. At first it appears there's absolutely no connection

between God's response and Abram's request. When Abram asked, "how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" God gave instructions for Abram to do something that would be done by two important people who were establishing a covenant between themselves. The Lord asked Abram, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon." Abram understood this request from God to mean that God was going to establish a covenant with him. So Abram brought all of these before the Lord, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other. However he did not cut the birds in two but rather put the dove on one side and the pigeon on the other side. Then he spent the rest of the day keeping the birds of prey from descending on these sacrificed animals. All day long he drove away the birds that would come down and want to eat the flesh of the heifer and the goat and the ram.

When the sun was setting, a deep sleep fell upon Abram. It was not the sleep of tiredness, but rather a supernatural kind of sleep that fell upon him. He was covered with a dreadful darkness. In that dreadful darkness, God spoke to him. And then in the midst of that dreadful darkness he saw an unbelievable sight. A smoking firepot and a blazing torch appeared and moved mysteriously between the severed pieces of these sacrificed animals. It was none other than the manifestation of the presence of God.

You have to understand the ancient ritual of establishing covenants. When two men would establish a covenant between themselves, they would commonly kill some animals, divide up the carcass, and so arrange them on the ground that it was possible for the two of them to walk in and out among the arranged pieces. They would walk in something like a figure eight between

these dead pieces of flesh. It was their way of saying to each other that if either of them violated the covenant between them, then the same thing should happen to them that had happened to these animals. They should be torn limb from limb and their flesh scattered across the earth. They would by this act call a curse down upon themselves.

The thing that captures our attention first in this vision was that moving fire in and out among the pieces. Abram understood this. He understood that the sovereign Lord was condescending to manifest Himself to him. What he was seeing in this darkness was none other than the manifestation of the Lord Himself. He was being reminded by the flaming fire that the God that had called him from the Ur of the Chaldeans is a holy God, a consuming fire, one of complete integrity. This manifestation of God's presence was designed to assist the weakening faith of His servant Abram.

Abram wanted to know how, but by the manifestation of His presence God lifted his eyes off of the land to the One who had made the promise. The holy God who made the promise would be responsible for the fulfillment of the promise. His presence with Abram in the darkness was adequate to strengthen his faith.

You may find yourself in a situation like this. Maybe there is a promise that God has given and you've been trying to hold on to that promise tenaciously by faith. You may be crying out to God, "How?" God's response may well be simply to come close and give you a fresh and encounter with His Holy Presence. When you know the holy presence of the Lord with you, it is

easier to believe that He will indeed do what he has said He will do. You may not need a work of God in your life as much as you need God in your life.

II. GOD ASSISTS OUR FAITH BY A PROMISE.

In the midst of that darkness God gave to Abram an expansion upon the promise. The promise had been that God would give him the land of Canaan as a possession. But under the cover of that dreadful darkness that came upon him, God expanded upon that promise. He made several things known to Abram:

1. A promise would be fulfilled in his descendents.

When God gives a promise, even though it is given to an individual the actual fulfillment of that promise may be delayed in terms of time.

2. Between the life of Abram and the fulfillment of the promise, his people would go through at least four hundred years of great suffering.

“Know for certain that your descendents will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.”

3. God would inflict judgement upon the nation that enslaved them.

“But I will punish the nation that they serve as slaves.”

4. God would bring His people into possession of the land after the four hundred years of

suffering.

“And afterward they will come out with great possession.”

5. Abram would die at a ripe old age without ever actually receiving the land.

“You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at good old age.”

6. God had to wait for the sin of the Amorites to reach its full measure before he expelled them from the land.

“For the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

All of this is a reminder to us that there is more involved than we can see in the fulfillment of God’s promises. To Abram it seemed like a rather simple and straightforward promise – “I will give you this land to take possession of it.” But when God began to explain to him something of what would be involved in the fulfillment of that promise, it became greatly complicated. The fulfillment of that promise involved not only Abram and his descendants; it also involved the ten different national groups that then inhabited the land. God said, “To your descendants I will give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates.” He then lists the ten different groups that were then occupying the land.

When we step back from this and look at it it’s easy to see how God was giving encouragement to and assistance to the faith of Abram. God is giving him a greater insight into His ways and His works. Whenever God is pleased to take His servant a little deeper in the understanding of His purposes, then faith is strengthened and enlarged. This is what God is doing. He is

strengthening the faith of Abram by sharing His own secrets with Abram. He is treating Abram as a friend rather than as a servant. By doing this He is strengthening the faith of Abram. Are you in need of having your faith strengthened? Does your faith need some bolstering up tonight? Tell the Lord! Ask Him to take you a little deeper in your perception of His presence and in your understanding of His promise. He is able and He is willing to do that. When He has done that, He will bring you to the place where you are aware that you're really trusting in the Lord and in Him alone. He will become more important to you than any promise that He has ever given you. He will become more important to you than anything else in your life. He will bring you to that place that the only thing that matters is that you can do what He wants you to do.

May God's very best become a part of your life as God strengthens your faith.

Alternate Outline

Introduction:

Saving faith is not necessarily strong faith. It will need to be strengthened and will need to grow.

Abram is an example of this.

He believed the promise that God gave concerning a son, but God had more than a son for him.

God had given to him a land, the land of Canaan.

This challenged the weak faith of Abram and he makes his weakness known to God. His

question was born of weak faith, not a questioning of the purpose of God.

God graciously moves in a way to strengthen the faith of his servant. We learn from this about

the ways of God with the people of faith, how He strengthens their faith. His ways have not

changed.

Wherever God finds saving faith, He will move in ways to strengthen it.

I. BY THE MANIFESTATION OF HIS PRESENCE.

1. The Presence in the darkness.

Was the darkness a manifestation of the presence of God? There was such a darkness at Mt. Sinai, and at Calvary.

2. The Presence in the fire.

Fire is associated with the holiness of God. Was this a consuming fire like the fire at the dedication of the temple? Probably consumed the sacrifices that Abram had laid out.

II. BY THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A COVENANT.

1. Based on Sacrifice.

Both the old and the new covenants are based on sacrifices. The new on the sufficient sacrifice of the perfect Son of God. The better sacrifice is one of the things that makes it superior to the old.

2. Includes a Promise.

This promises related to the land. Notice the details of the promise, and how each of them was exactly fulfilled in the unfolding of history.

Will not the God of the covenant fulfill every promise that is made in the new covenant?

3. Established by an oath.

God went between the parts of the sacrifice in committing Himself to the covenant. He bound Himself by an oath. His condescending to our human understanding.

So when God wants to strengthen our faith He reveals His person and His word to us. As we get to know Him better and His word better, we become stronger in our faith.