

## THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

Of all the men in the Old Testament, the figure of Abraham, known originally as Abram, dominates the book of Genesis and his name casts a shadow across the whole message of the Scriptures. He received from God great promises which permeates both the Old and New Testaments that involved his descendants becoming a “great nation” in the land of Canaan, and the blessing of all the nations on the earth through the future king descendant of Abraham. The most sermons the average church members have heard about Abraham is that in the story of the rich man and Lazarus “the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom” (Lk.16:2). The importance of Abraham to the Christian faith is seen in the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 4 where he refers to Abraham four times as being “the father of the faithful” (verses 1, 11, 12, and 16). He is the only man in the Old Testament of whom it is said had the gospel preached to him in advance (Gal. 3:8).

We are first introduced to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3: “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your own country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to a land I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; so that you will be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse, and in you all the families, of the earth will be blessed.’” It is in chapter 17 that this promise is developed by covenant. God says, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: you will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram, your name shall be Abraham, for *I have made you the father of many nations*. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you” (Gen. 17:4-6). God affirms “*I have made you the father of many nations*.” This is a “prolepsis,” found many times in the Scriptures. Prolepsis is a word defined by Webster as “the describing of an event as taking place before it could have happened, the treating of a future event as if it had already been accomplished.” God said to Abraham “To your descendants *I have given this land*” (Gen. 15:18). At this time Abraham had no descendants and it was over four hundred years later that this was realized, yet God said He had done it. In referring to the promise made to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-6; 18:18) Romans 4:17 states: “as it is written, ‘A father of many nations *I have made you*’ in the sight of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and *calls into being that which does not exist*.” The KJV and NIV translate the last phrase as: “*and calls things that are not as though they were*.” God calls those things which have not yet taken place as though they already were. God “giving life to the dead” refers to the future resurrection when He will “call into being that which does not exist.” God is speaking as things done when they have not yet come to pass) “*I have made you the father of many nations*.”

In Romans 15:8 the Apostle Paul shows the covenant was confirmed by the coming of Jesus Christ. Anthony Buzzard in *Our Fathers Who Aren’t in Heaven* writes: This covenant “provides an indispensable guide to the meaning of New Testament Christianity, a blueprint for the ongoing plan of God.

It would be no exaggeration the failure to grasp the terms of God’s arrangements with Abraham is the root of massive confusion now existing in the minds of churchgoers in regard to *the whole purpose of the Christian faith*.” *The prime motive* behind the call of Abraham is God’s intention to bless humanity and reverse the disaster of Adam’s rebellion in the Garden.

*The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* on this subject states: “God says regarding Sarah ‘I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations, kings and of peoples that shall come from her’ (Gen.17:16). The mention of nations coming from Abraham and Sarah presents a problem if taken to mean those nations directly descend from both of them; strictly speaking only the Israelites and the Edomites fall into this category. However the idea of Abraham’s being the father of many nations is not restricted here to physical descendants; in Genesis the term ‘father’ does not always denote a biological relationship (in 45:8 Joseph is described as ‘father of Pharaoh’ cf Judges 17:10, II Kings 2:12” When God told Abraham He had made him “the father of many nations” is another “prolepsis” in the Bible, (God declaring a thing a fact, yet it had not happened). When Paul states in Romans 4:17 that when God said Abraham was “the Father of many nations,” he was not so in actual fact. He was not the father even of Isaac at that point, and it seemed impossible that he ever would be, because Abraham was ninety-nine years of age and Sarah was ninety—they were a childless couple. But in the sight of God he was already father of Isaac and all his descendants, father of this endues progeny, the father of all the faithful and the father of Jesus Christ, according to the flesh, because he came out of the loins of Abraham (Matt.1:1). God saw Abraham in this light. How could He do this? Paul answers this (and defines “prolepsis”): Romans 4:17: “‘A father of many nations I have made you’ in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God who gives life to the dead and *calls into being that which does not exist*.” (Another example of this is in Romans 8:30). Of the Christian it is said “those He justified, He also *glorified*).

How could a mere man as Abraham believe such a promise that was from the human point so improbable, even absurd? In his commentary on Romans, Anders Nygren, famous Sweden theologian, wrote: “It is not the sheer fact that one believes the improbable, the impossible, the absurd, that constitutes Abraham’s faith. He had God’s promise, and it was that which he believed. Only in the light of that fact can one properly speak about what is humanly impossible. Since he had the divine promise, he could not be made to doubt God by the fact that he saw clearly that human resources were not equal to the fulfillment. This is faith, to hold to God’s promise, even if man has no human ability to build on, even if all human calculations contradict.” Paul describes Abraham’s faith in these words: “Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb; yet with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised He was able to perform” (Rom. 4:19-21). Where man can manage on his own resources it is not a matter of faith; faith is not self-reliance, faith is the opposite of one’s adequacy and

resources. Our faith is comparable to Abraham's because we believe in a God that gives life to the dead, whether it be life given due to the age of Abraham, the deadness of Sarah's womb, or to resurrection of both the righteous and wicked (Acts 24:15).

In the beginning of this article we quoted Genesis 12:1-3. This subject introduced here is rooted in chapters 12, 13, 14 and is mentioned constantly throughout the Hebrew Bible and several times in the New Testament. Why is it important to us today, or is it really of any value for the Christian to give serious attention to this promise made to Abraham? Paul answers that question in Galatians chapter 3: "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say 'And to seeds' as referring to many, rather but to one, 'And to your *seed*' that is Christ" (ver.16). "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's *seed, heirs according to promise.* (ver.29). Romans 4:13 identifies the promise: "For the promise to Abraham or to his seed that he would be *heir of the world* was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith." These passages show that the promise to Abraham was not limited to a small land in the Middle East, that is Canaan, but is enlarged to contain *the world*. This promise is further identified by Jesus in the sermon on the Mount when he said in Matthew 5:5: "Blessed are the meek for they shall *inherit the earth.*" Jesus is merely confirming the words spoken by the Psalmist in Psalm 37: "Those who wait for the Lord will inherit the land" (ver.9), "But the humble will inherit the land" (ver. 11), "For those blessed by Him shall inherit the land" (ver. 22), and "The righteous will inherit the land" (ver.29). "Wait for the Lord and keep His way, and He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off you will see it" (ver. 34).

Many Bible scholars (?) insist that the promise made to Abraham was fulfilled when Israel entered the land of Canaan, and there remains no Scriptural promises that God has not brought to pass. This, however, is contradicted by both the Old and the New Testaments. This is a subject, to para-phrase George Deuble's title to his book on the trinity, *They Never Told Me This in Church. They never told me this in Bible College*, and it is a subject absent from the pulpits. Just before Joshua's death, he warns them of "these nations that remain among you" (Josh. 23:7, 12) and the book of Judges opens with the record that "they did not drive out the nations completely" (Judges 1). Add to this the words of Stephen as he was martyred "But God gave him (Abraham) no inheritance in in the land, not even a foot of ground, yet even when he had no child, He promised He would give it to him as a possession, and to his descendants (*seed*) after him." (Acts 7:5). "All these (including Abraham), having gained approval did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us that apart from us, they would not be made perfect." (Hebrews 11:39, 40). This means that Abraham, along with all believers will be made perfect in the resurrection of the last day.

The promise to Abraham *and his seed* could not be fulfilled before Christ because Christ was his *seed* (Gal. 3:16). When preaching in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia Paul preached that God raised Christ from the dead and he affirmed that "We preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled *this promise* to us their children in that He has raised up Jesus, as it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are My son, this day I have begotten you'...He has spoken in this way 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David'" (Acts 13:30-34). So with the resurrection of Christ God is beginning to fulfill the promise made to Abraham. The promise

to Abraham was confirmed when God made covenant with David, that his throne would be established forever (II Sam 7:10-17). God "has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant" (Luke 1:69).

To quote Anthony Buzzard again (*Ibid*) "This message has become universal in scope. The future of all humanity is bound up with the promise of the Greater son of David, *the Messiah* whose kingdom, the land promise, will provide the ultimate solution to all the world's ills, as well as the final answer to the 'Jewish problem.' Built upon the earlier land promise with Abraham, the Davidic promise contained the following assurances: 'I will also appoint a place for my people Israel, and I will plant them, that they may live in their own place and not be disturbed again, nor will the wicked afflict them any more as formerly'" (II Sam. 7:10). On these mighty themes of permanent security, Monarchy and territory, the whole structure of the biblical story rests. The message, it should be carefully noted, is never merely 'religious.' It is both national and universal--and related to the future of the earth."

Let's turn now to the believer's inheritance based upon Galatians 3:16: "And if you belong to Christ then you are Abraham's seed, *heirs according to the promise.*" The promise to Abraham was that he and his seed would be the "heir to the world" (Rom 4:13). This is simply to repeat the promise of Jesus that "the meek shall inherit the earth (Matt.5:5). Luther in his commentary on Romans leaves out the words in Romans 4:13 which state that Abraham "would be heir of the world"! This meant losing the central truth that the earth is the inheritance promised as the destiny of believers! The Apostle Peter states it in these words: "Blessed be he God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an *inheritance* which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away reserved in heaven for you...*ready to be revealed in the last time*" (I Pet. 1:3, 4, 5). The Apostle Paul states that "In him we have obtained an inheritance" and "the Holy Spirit of promise is given us as a pledge of our inheritance" (Eph. 1:11, 14).

Romans 8:17 states that if we are children of God then we are "heirs also. Heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ." Being joint heirs with Christ, his people inherit the same thing. Psalm 2:8, 9 reveals what the inheritance of Christ will be: "Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as your inheritance, and the ends of the earth as your possession. You will break them with a rod of iron, you shall shatter them like earthen ware." A joint heir shares everything the heir inherits. If Christ rules the nations of the earth, then we will rule the earth with him. "He who overcomes and he who keeps my deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from my Father" (Rev. 2:26, 27). This is a quotation from Psalm 2:8, 9, and is further stated in these words: "you did purchase for God with your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And you have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will *reign upon the earth*" (Rev. 5:9, 10). The religious world has been so absorbed with walking the streets of gold with Christ in heaven, they have never considered ruling with him on earth. Jesus never said we would inherit a city in the sky, rather "the meek shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5). This, of course, will be an earth that is no longer under a curse. The curse imposed on the earth will be ended when Christ appears.