

What is the faith which God affirms?

A reflection on Genesis 15

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One of the most common conversations about God that I have begins like this: "I love God. Or, at least, I thought I did. And I thought God loved me, since, in Jesus, He died for me and forgave my sin. . . But now someone said that if I . . . (insert struggle with some vice), and if I haven't . . . (fill in some spiritual discipline), then God's wrath is on me and I am not saved. And they made it sound as if I wouldn't have any struggles and questions if I was in a relationship with God. And I wonder if I even belong with these people."

For the person who is telling me this, my first concern is that they put their focus back on Jesus, what He has already done, what He promised and how He said it (all of these found in the Bible.) Jesus is my hope and salvation; my performance is not. But a secondary question is about the nature of the faith in which we are saved. That was on my mind when I was reading Genesis 15.

In Genesis 15 God comes to Abram in a vision, telling him not to fear, because he has a great reward coming.

But Abram is not satisfied with that information. Essentially, Abram asks, "What difference does it make? If I die without an heir, my story is over." It is not clear here what Abram understands about life after death. What seems to bother him is that he will pass on no legacy unless he fathers a son; and with no legacy, his life will be wasted.

Western thinkers would tell Abram that he has intrinsic value. He doesn't need a family to prove his worth. But that would sound meaningless to a man of Abram's culture.

Wouldn't this be a good time for God to tell Abram about eternal life, about how any life has potential to impact other lives for eternal good, about how God is working through the life of Abram in a way that will prove eternally significant? Well, the language of eternal life and impacting other lives for eternity is more fully developed after Jesus came 2000 years later. Abram doesn't appear to be thinking in those categories. But God does speak to Abram's desire for his life to be significant. And God doesn't do that by minimizing the significance of an heir. God promises many heirs--in numbers as countless as the stars.

Abram believes God. He trusts God to fulfill that promise (Genesis 15:6). God counts Abram's faith as righteousness. And that seems to be the vital point of this episode. The New Testament builds upon that statement.

For his Roman audience, Paul the apostle makes that verse the foundation for a major argument (Romans 4:3). Paul points out, for the legally-minded Romans, that God was not paying Abram for wages earned. God was promising a gift, and the response God considered ideal was Abram's trust.

James also quotes Genesis 15:6 (in James 2:23). To his more pragmatic Hebrew audience, James points out that Abram's trust in God was not a mere theory. Abram lived out his trust--to the extent that he willingly offered up the son which God eventually gave him. In effect, James is saying that faith never was a mere theory. What we believe is reflected in the lives we live.

(For a 21st-century audience accustomed to measuring everything with numerical accuracy, I need to point out that neither Paul nor James said that faith is a commodity which can be measured in numerical amounts and then compared to a lesser faith. Talking of "perfect faith" in percentages is a modern, western train of thought. And it isn't helpful. Paul denies that very idea, and James doesn't use that kind of language. James does not argue that "works" of faith save you. He argues that the kind of faith that saves inevitably shows up in our lives--not in measurable percentages, but simply in actions that would be meaningless if not for a purposeful faith prompting them. I would gladly describe this further, but in a separate post. I don't want to lose track of what Abram is showing about this faith which God calls righteous.)

What strikes me here is that the specific faith which James and Paul are talking about--the faith Abram had when he believed God in Genesis 15--is not a faith free from doubts and questions. First, Abram asked for clarification: "Lord, I don't have an heir. So how am I supposed to feel rewarded?" God's answer was to clarify that many heirs would in fact be his. Abram believed God, and that is the trust which God counted righteous.

But the conversation doesn't end there. God also promised to give those heirs the land where Abram was living. Again, Abram has questions. He doesn't actually possess the land. He asks, "How am I supposed to know that I will possess it?" An impatient parent would answer, "Because I told you so." But God doesn't answer that way.

Up to this point, God had been speaking to Abram in a vision, but now God puts Abram into a deep sleep. Abram experiences a dreadful darkness, and God says that his offspring will be slaves in a land not theirs and afflicted for 400 years. But God says he will judge that nation and bring the offspring out with great possessions.

The details of those two verses play out through the five books of Exodus through Joshua. All Abram knows is that God will use something dreadful over a long time to bring Abram's family into possession of this homeland.

So this righteous faith involves questions, and the answers are not fully-formed foreknowledge for Abram. But apparently, Abram knows that God has in fact been the one speaking to him. He also knows that God is promising something that has not been in evidence yet. He knows that God is going to work through something dreadful to bring it to fulfillment. And Abram believes Him.

So I ask, what is this righteous-counting-faith? To clarify what it is, it helps me to state it in the negative to clarify what it isn't:

1. It isn't a faith devoid of questions. God doesn't get angry when Abram questions him.
2. It isn't a faith in impersonal generalities. God is speaking personally to Abram, and Abram is asking personal questions. Abram knows this involves him, and it seems to be completely about a relationship with God.
3. It isn't faith with a complete theological system worked out. I have spent decades trying to understand more specific answers which God has already given to a list of questions to which I have yet to find an end. But nearly all of them came AFTER I first trusted God. I have been graced with a lifetime

of people who encouraged my questions and made it a pleasure to seek answers. But the context for them is a relationship, not a system.

To paraphrase others: Your relationship with God is the home in which you live. Your theology is the front facade; it is what you picture when someone asks what you believe. (The question "what," rather than "who" directs you there.) Doctrine may be your curb appeal, but faith is the living space.

4. This faith doesn't have much to do with things that Abram can control. Abram could leave Ur, but a lot of specifics simply were not given. What Abram wanted was a son, and God had not given that. God promised to give way more than that. Most of what God promised would happen after Abram died. Abram mainly wanted a son, and even the fulfillment of that promise would come near the end of a long life. This suggests that a walk of faith is a (potentially) long process--largely distinct to the individual--in which a life's course rolls out of the trust relationship, with many falls, some of them devastating, and along the way the person understands more of what God has said--but there is no clear trajectory other than to follow where God leads.

(It sounds uncomfortable to say "no clear trajectory"--at least to my subculture. My culture worships a sense of perpetual progress. But I fear that our sense of trajectory can be a dangerous replacement for the Lord Himself who calls us to follow where He leads. Consider the words "if the Lord wills" in James 4. He doesn't commonly give visions of specific locations, personnel, dates, tempo, and color scheme. Our vision statements often sound more like marketing campaigns than anything God has said. When He says, for example, "Make disciples of all nations," he gives no specific method or list of priorities. We are left to discover the details by studying his words while inquiring of the Spirit--within the immediate relationships and parameters in which He places us. People gravitate to simplicity, but the Bible doesn't seem concerned about it. So faith isn't necessarily a clear vision of where we will be in 7 years.)

5. This faith is not the assurance that God will keep his people from suffering. To the contrary, God says he will work through suffering. But he promises good outcomes.

6. Romans 4 emphasizes that this faith is not a service that earns wages. It is a relationship that God graciously gives--demonstrated when God made a covenant with Abram, who had no part in making it but to be in the relationship. Paul argues that circumcision was *evidence* of a faith relationship, not the *cause*. Paul is telling Romans that this faith is not something that lets you feel more deserving than others. It is a gift.

7. James emphasizes that this faith is not merely an abstract theory. It played out in Abraham's willingness to offer up his son. God affirmed that willingness--and provided a substitute in place of Abraham's son--just as God counted righteous Abram's belief that God would do what he promised. James sees the same kind of willingness in people who impartially share with their "brothers" who are in need. He is not saying that the sharing saves you. He is saying that the generous impartiality evidences a prior faith--an assurance that God will provide. James is telling Hebrews that this faith is not something that lets you feel more worthy than others. It gives freedom and mercy, not judgment (James 2:13-14).

8. So both James and Paul point out Abram's faith to emphasize--to people in danger of arrogant self-righteousness--that this faith is not about looking down on others. They both seem to be keenly aware that some people take the gospel to be a trump card that makes them superior (rather than a love that makes them gracious), while others respond to it as a threat that oppresses (rather than a deliverance

that liberates). In my experience, those dangers loom over us today just as they did when the epistles were written. So those are the misperceptions I work to overcome.

Now, to return to my initial conversation:

"Someone said that if I . . . (insert struggle with some vice), and if I haven't . . . (fill in some spiritual discipline), then God's wrath is on me and I am not saved. And they made it sound as if I wouldn't have any struggles and questions if I was in a relationship with God."

I am hesitant to presume that the person who said such things intended to prompt such a crisis of faith. There is a lot of room for misunderstanding. But I shudder to think that my communication of the good news might be heard in that way.

In the end, the Bible portrays a Savior worthy of our trust and beckons us to know Him, trust his assurance, learn his ways, and share his good news. When He says, "Follow Me, and in the end your hopes will be more than fulfilled," and we believe Him, that's a simple faith that God embraces, even though the context is a very complicated story.