

# Faith in Things Unseen

***“Faith is a basis of things hoped for, a conviction of things unseen.”***  
—***Hebrews 11:1, The Emphatic Diaglott***

**IN THE BOOK OF HEBREWS,** chapter eleven, the Apostle Paul begins by defining faith, as stated in our opening verse. He then goes on to describe a list of individuals from Old Testament times who received promises from God and then demonstrated faith in those promises by their actions. Consequently, they all “obtained a good report through faith.” (Heb. 11:39) Their faith enabled them to pass through the experiences and tests which God permitted to come upon them. In particular, Paul points out from the life of Abraham more lessons of faith than from any other individual cited in this chapter, covering much of his life.—vss. 8-19

When God first called Abram, whose name he later changed to Abraham, he promised him and his progeny “a land that I will shew thee. ... Unto thy seed will I give this land.” (Gen. 12:1,7) Abraham had never seen this land. Nevertheless, he accepted the invitation and left his native country “not knowing whither he went.” (Heb. 11:8) God also promised him that he would have a “seed,” or child. However,

his wife Sarah “was barren.” (Gen. 11:30) Abraham did not know how this portion of the promise would be fulfilled, although he believed that God was both willing and able to fulfill his promises.

## **OUR EXPERIENCES SIMILAR**

Many experiences which Jesus’ followers have during the present age require a faith similar to Abraham’s. God permits us to undergo various experiences so that we may develop a strong and immovable faith. As our faith develops and takes hold upon God’s promises, we are led to value most highly spiritual things, those which cannot be seen by the natural eye, nor understood by human intellect.—I Cor. 2:5-14

Another portion of the promise given to Abraham included the wonderful plan of our Heavenly Father for all mankind, which states, “In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.” (Gen. 12:2,3) Many years later, the psalmist David asked God, “What is man, that thou art mindful of him?” (Ps. 8:4) Abraham may have similarly wondered: Who am I, that God should speak to me and make known his purpose to bless all the families of the earth? This, however, was exactly what God did, and Abraham had the necessary faith to believe what the Creator had told him. He demonstrated his faith by believing the “things unseen” which God had promised.

Faith is not blind belief, in the sense of having no basis upon which to rest. On the contrary, faith is founded upon a knowledge of God’s divine purposes and promises, as given in the Bible. Paul explains that all divinely inspired Scripture is “profitable for teaching, for conviction, for correction, for that discipline which is in righteousness; so that the man of

God may be complete, thoroughly fitted for every good work.” (II Tim. 3:16,17, *Diaglott*) Elsewhere, the apostle says that “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” (Rom. 10:17) Faith has been concisely described as “believing and completely trusting what God says.” Thus, in the case of Abraham, all he needed to know was what God had promised, and his faith rested upon this.

## **GOD FULFILLS ALL HIS PROMISES**

Those seeking after God increasingly realize that he has kept and will continue to fulfill all his promises. Through the words of Isaiah, he states: “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (Isa. 55:10,11, *New International Version*) How glad we are to learn that God will soon restore all mankind to life upon the earth and give everyone an opportunity to live everlastingly upon a perfect earth. (Isa. 26:19; 35:1-10; Luke 2:10; Acts 3:20,21) God is never late in fulfilling his promises. As Peter wrote, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” —II Pet. 3:9, *NIV*

During the present Gospel Age, a special opportunity has been afforded to become a partaker of the “heavenly calling.” (Heb. 3:1; Phil. 3:14) At first, some may have wondered: Why would God choose

me for such favor and honor as to be privileged to hear, through the Scriptures, his voice? However, in time we learn that God's grace is bestowed upon us, "not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus." (II Tim. 1:9) It is wonderful indeed to answer this invitation from the Heavenly Father, but it is also costly. God said to Abraham, "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house." (Gen. 12:1) This meant the forsaking of much that Abraham held dear, but he obeyed.

Similarly, we hear, through the prophetic Word, God inviting us to "forget also thine own people, and thy father's house." (Ps. 45:10) While this invitation does not have the same literal meaning as did God's call to Abraham, it is no less exacting in terms of sacrifice. We are not asked, necessarily, to move away a great distance as in the case of Abraham, but we are invited to put God first in all our hopes, plans and goals. Jesus stated that those who love father, mother, husband, wife, or other earthly family more than they love him, cannot be his "disciple." —Matt. 10:37; Luke 14:26

This does not mean that we are to ignore the needs of our family. Paul states emphatically, "If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith." (I Tim. 5:8) Indeed, in the case of Abraham, when called to leave his native land, he took with him his family—Sarah his wife, Terah his father, and his young nephew Lot, whose father Haran had previously died. (Gen. 11:31) As followers of Jesus, the call to forget "thine own people and thy father's house" means that we have an opportunity to forego a future earthly resurrection,

and the blessings of God's kingdom on earth, soon to come. (Matt. 6:10) Rather, we instead embark now upon a lifelong journey of character development in order to receive, if faithful unto death, a heavenly resurrection—the “first” resurrection.—Col. 1:5; Rev. 2:10; 20:6

## **GOD'S PROMISES—OUR FOUNDATION OF FAITH**

If we have responded to the heavenly calling by making a full and unreserved consecration to God, we then begin to gradually develop faith in God's “exceeding great and precious promises.” (II Pet. 1:4) We come to understand that, from an eternal standpoint, “no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly” in the narrow way. (Ps. 84:11; Matt. 7:14) In time, we develop the conviction that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose,” and we appreciate more deeply “what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God.” (Rom. 8:28; I John 3:1) These and many other precious promises of God are the “basis” of our faith, and which give us “conviction” in “things unseen,” as described in our opening text.

Like Abraham, we answer the call not knowing the exact manner in which all our experiences will come about, and the way in which they will be supervised by God to develop our characters. We do know, from the Scriptures, that God is asking us to devote our all to him, including time, talents, means, reputation and influence. (Matt. 16:24; Luke 6:22,23; Phil. 3:7,8; I Pet. 4:2) Abraham's faith grew stronger with the passage of time. When God first spoke to

him, his faith was sufficient to obey God's call to leave his native land. Later, however, as his faith was tested, he did not always fully obey as he might have done. (Gen. 20:1-18) In this also is a lesson for us, as we too may not always follow the Lord's instructions as fully as we should.

### **“UNSEEN” VERSUS “SEEN” THINGS**

When we dedicate ourselves in consecration to God, we tell him that it is our intention to leave “those things which are behind.” (Phil. 3:13) However, due to fleshly weakness, we may often lay hold upon the heavenly promises with one hand, while with the other hand we still cling to earthly things. We hear the admonition, “Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth,” and we try to do so. Yet, at times, our affections may come tumbling down to earth and entangle themselves around the temporary joys and advantages which we promised God we would give up, in order to make progress toward heavenly glory.—Col. 3:1,2

Our minds and hearts will not bend heavenward all at once. It requires training and struggle over our consecrated lifetime to carry this out as we would like. It is here that faith becomes so essential. As the apostle explains, “This is the victory [Greek, *nike*: the means of success] that overcometh the world, even our faith.” (I John 5:4) If our faith in the “unseen” heavenly promises of God is weak, then they are sure to be proportionately less important to us. At the same time, the “seen” things, the temporary blessings and pleasures of this world, we will deem of greater value. However, if our faith is strong, the “unseen” things of God will become real and vital, and the

“seen” things of the present life will fade to a position of relative unimportance.—II Cor. 4:17,18

As Abraham was put to the test, each experience enabled his faith to grow stronger. God has also promised to permit a variety of circumstances to come into our lives, in order to strengthen our faith and give us opportunities to develop a firmer hold upon his promises.—Heb. 12:5-11

## **FAITH DEVELOPED OVER TIME**

One of God’s methods of developing the faith of his people is in connection with the element of time. In the sight of God, “a thousand years ... are but as yesterday.” (Ps. 90:4) By contrast, we often measure time relative to our lifespan. Consequently, ten years may seem to us like a long time. If God permits us to wait that long for the fulfillment of one or more of his promises, our faith is put to a severe test, yet we should not become discouraged nor lose faith.

Such was the case with Abraham. When he was seventy-five years old, in addition to promising land, God pledged to him that he and his wife Sarah would have a son, a “seed.” (Gen. 12:1-4) However, after eleven years had passed and no son was born to Sarah, Abraham’s faith was tested. Consequently, he followed Sarah’s suggestion that he father a child by her handmaid, Hagar. As a result, a son, Ishmael, was born to Abraham by Hagar.—Gen. 16:1-16

Thirteen years after Ishmael was born, God spoke to Abraham, telling him again that he and his wife Sarah would have a son, and his name would be called Isaac. When Abraham heard this, he fell on his face and laughed. (Gen. 17:15-17) Then he replied to God, “O that Ishmael [Hagar’s son] might live

before thee!” (vs. 18) Here was a momentary lack of faith. Abraham was suggesting that Ishmael could just as well be the seed of promise. If God would accept this arrangement, then there would be no more difficulty about the promised seed.

Abraham’s laughter seemed to indicate he doubted that Sarah would ever bear a son. When God first made the promise that they would have a child, Sarah was sixty-five years old and barren. At that time, evidently, Abraham’s faith was strong enough to believe that God would overcome Sarah’s barrenness. However, twenty-four years had now passed by, and this had not occurred. Sarah was not only still barren, but with Abraham now ninety-nine years old and Sarah eighty-nine years old, both were well past the normal age for conceiving a child. (Gen. 17:1) Why, they perhaps thought, should God keep talking about what was highly unlikely?

Abraham did not know how God would fulfill his promise, and at first his faith was not strong enough to believe what he could not “see.” Had Abraham understood, in detail, the way God would fulfill his promises, he would have been walking by sight, and not by faith. All he really needed to know was that God had made a promise, and this should have been a sufficient foundation for his faith. In the end it was, because after God reassured Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son, he “staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, ... And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform.”—Gen. 18:1-14; 21:1-7; Rom. 4:16-21

God also tests our faith oftentimes by permitting us to wait for the fulfillment of his promises. This



principle of God's dealings with his people is indicated by the message which he gave to the Prophet Habakkuk: "The vision is yet for an appointed time, ... though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come." (Hab. 2:2,3) Indeed, the Lord's people in this end of the Gospel Age have had their faith severely tested by the seemingly long wait for the fruition of their hopes. The signs Jesus spoke of concerning present world conditions, including the "distress of nations, with perplexity; ... Men's hearts failing them for fear," should be a great stimulus to our faith, for as he further explained, "When these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption [deliverance] draweth nigh."—Luke 21:25-28

## **SEVERE TESTS OF FAITH**

At ninety years of age, Sarah gave birth to Isaac, the promised seed. God had kept his long-stated promise! Years later, however, when Isaac grew to be a young man, Abraham's faith was further tested in a most difficult manner. God asked him to offer Isaac in sacrifice. This was truly a severe test upon Abraham, but through many years of experience his faith had grown strong, and he had learned to trust all of God's promises. He knew that it was nothing short of the power of God which enabled him and Sarah to have a son. Abraham had now heard the voice of God again, and to the human mind, the message seemed contrary to all that had been previously promised. God had performed a miracle in order that Isaac might be born, so why should he now be slain?—Gen. 22:1-18

However, Abraham raised no such question, but fully obeyed, because of his faith in the wisdom, love

and power of God. His faith had become so strong that he believed God could raise Isaac from the dead, in order to fulfill his promises in connection with the seed. (Heb. 11:17-19) This was “full assurance of faith!” (Heb. 10:22) It is comparatively easy to have faith in God and in his promises when the circumstances of life are favorable, such as having a comfortable home, a loving family, a secure job and good health. Besides these temporal blessings, we enjoy privileges of fellowship with the brethren and service of the Truth. Thus we exclaim: Surely the Lord is good!

We may have a strong faith under such favorable circumstances, but how strong is our faith when God’s providences permit troubles, illness, difficulties or various injustices to come upon us? God spoke to Abraham in terms of sacrifice, and he speaks to us in the same manner. Is our faith, like Abraham’s, strong enough to obey even though we may not know the reason for the experiences which God is permitting us to have? It was a great joy to Abraham when Isaac was born and for him to experience the obvious, miraculous power of God in this matter. Now, however, it was different. This dear son whom he loved, this miracle son, was now to be slain as a sacrificial offering. This is what the voice of God said, and in full faith, Abraham obeyed.

How does our faith compare with that of Abraham? Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you.” (John 14:27) We accept that with rejoicing, and the peace and joy of the Lord is received as a blessed portion. However, how do we react when we hear those other words, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, ... that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable      *(Continued on page 36)*

(Continued from page 31) service?” (Rom. 12:1) Do we recognize this heavenly call to sacrifice as also being the voice of God; and recognizing it, are we continuing to obey it?

## **GOD PROVIDES**

The place designated by God where Isaac was to be offered in sacrifice was a three-day journey from Abraham’s home. On the third day, he instructed the two young men who had accompanied them to remain and that he and Isaac would continue on. “Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.”—Gen. 22:1-7

With simple but profound faith, Abraham replied, “My son, God will provide himself a lamb.” (vs. 8) Abraham did not know just what God would do, but he had faith to believe that God would make some provision to spare Isaac from death. We know this because when Abraham told the two young men to stay behind, he also said to them, “I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.”—vs. 5

When Abraham raised the knife to slay Isaac, an angel of the Lord intervened to prevent the killing. Turning around, Abraham saw a ram—a male lamb caught in a thicket by its horns—which God had miraculously provided for an offering in Isaac’s stead. (vss. 9-13) Abraham did not know why this test of faith had been put upon him, but now we understand. We see in this experience a picture of the willing sacrifice of Jesus, the true “lamb of God” which God provided to take away the sin of the whole

world. (John 1:29; I Pet. 1:18,19) Additionally, the Scriptures inform us that Isaac is a picture of the Christ class—Jesus the head, and those faithful to the heavenly calling as members of his body.—Gal. 3:16,27-29; 4:28

There is something very insightful in the statement the angel of the Lord made to Abraham following this experience. He said, “Now I know that thou fearest [reverence] God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.” (Gen. 22:12) This indicates that God had reserved judgment concerning Abraham until he fully demonstrated his faith. It is the same with us. When we finally reach the end of our life, if we have been successful in demonstrating our faith by our actions, we will hear, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: ... enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”—Matt. 25:21

Abraham “died in faith,” not having received the fulfillment of all the promises God had made to him. Sarah had borne a son, but that seed had not yet blessed all the families of the earth. God had promised him the land of Canaan, but, while Abraham sojourned in it for a while, he never owned nor truly possessed it. (Acts 7:5) The complete fulfillment of God’s promises to him will not be until the resurrection. Thus it is with us. Faith will not have gained its victory until we have been “faithful unto death,” and receive the “crown of life.” (Rev. 2:10) Let us, therefore, remember these words of the Apostle Paul: “Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” —II Cor. 4:17,18, *NIV* ■