

## Devotional Thoughts :: Abraham, My Friend\_24

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Abraham, My Friend  
The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Four: New Beginnings  
and he believed in Jehovah...

Genesis 15 contains one of the most important verses in the Bible. The verse becomes the basis for a major New Testament doctrine; justification by faith. It is sometimes said that Christianity has Jewish roots; this is not strictly accurate. Christianity has Abrahamic roots which is not at all the same thing. Many evangelicals have developed a theology which says believe certain truths, pray certain words, and you are eternally safe. We need to challenge these assumptions.

Please have your Bible open in Genesis 14 while you read this devotional. You will see 21 verses which begin with "and". The next chapter begins "after these things". After what things? Well, the events of chapter 14 obviously but perhaps more than that, perhaps the whole of Abraham's life up to this point. At any rate, Gen 15:1 marks a clear transition; the events of chapter 15 occur after the events of chapter 14. That may not sound like rocket science but it is an important observation. The events of chapter 15 did not come "out of the blue"; they were part of Abraham's developing experience of God. The verse we are heading for is Gen 15:6 "and he believed in Jehovah; and he counted it to him for righteousness." But this verse occurs "after these things". The point is that this was not the first step in Abraham's experience of God; it could never have been the first step. The great danger of much modern evangelical practice is to make this the first step; this is a deadly delusion.

### revelation

It is important that key verses should be understood in context. Let's examine together the context of Gen 15:6 under 4 mini-headings; revelation, conversation, elevation, and confirmation. Let's begin with revelation. This chapter begins with a unique revelation from God to Abraham. It is important to notice who takes the initiative; God. The context of Gen 15:6 is not a gospel meeting, nor an occasion of personal witness, it is a personal revelation from God. After many preliminary events in the life of Abraham, many steps over many years, God spoke to Abraham in a vision. God broke into Abraham's consciousness and he became aware of God's voice. This is what I mean by revelation. Abraham became aware of things that he could never have discovered or calculated; this is the nature of revelation. It was an intensely personal experience, God uses the pronoun "I" and referring to Abraham says "thy"; this is an "I-thou" encounter, no one else is involved. God uses preaching and preachers but in the preaching the hearer must hear God and must meet God. In the revelation/vision Abraham hears the voice of God. This is vitally important as "faith" comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God; faith cannot begin until God has spoken.

In this revelation/vision God reveals Himself to Abraham. He does not promise to give something, or even to do something, He promises to be something. And He put it into the present tense, I am, "faith" can only work with present tenses. The revelation is intensely personal, "I am thy..." After this encounter Abraham would be able to say "Jehovah is my..." Again, my point is that the experience of these truths is not the result of a broadcast but of a personal conversation.

### conversation

Let's move on to the second of our mini-headings, conversation. These devotionals always have in mind our series subtitle, "the making of a praying Man". True prayer must always be founded on revelation which has led to conversation. I mean by this, that true prayer is the consequence of ongoing relationship. Genesis is the book of beginnings and this passage of Scripture is an amazing account of the beginning of prayer. This is the first conversation between God and Man in the book. (I don't think we can describe Adam's judgment in Genesis 3 as a conversation) Consider then, just how amazing this record is. This is the man who became God's Friend in his first conversation with God. How do you read the verses 2 and 3 of this chapter? Read the verses aloud and listen to the tone of your voice. Did you hear petulance, or protest? You have read the verses wrongly, read them again. This is a conversation not a technique for getting something from God. The "possessor of heaven and earth" has just given Himself to Abraham in extravagant promise.

There are very few recorded words from God to Abraham so it is not difficult to find out the last thing that God had said?

The last time that God had spoken personally to Abraham is recorded in Gen 13: 14-17. It includes the words "for all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth:" Now in Genesis 15 God has spoken to Abraham again. Abraham wants to know what bearing the second revelation has upon the earlier one. Abraham is trying to understand what God is saying; how does this truth fit into the earlier truth? This is good theology! And this is good theological method! He has taken his theological problem to God. How much more we would understand if we would only talk to God about it. Our instinct is to force new revelation into the old boxes. Have you ever noticed how much of the Lord's teaching is given in conversations rather than in sermons? It's not just a question, of course, of theology. Abraham is opening his heart to his friend; his own ache for a "seed" surfaces for the first time during this conversation. It's amazing what we discover about ourselves when we just talk to God. Let's recall the title of this series, Abraham, My Friend. I am concerned when I hear words like 'tactics' and 'strategy' in relation to prayer; these words have little to do with friendship. They fit well into modern Christian ideas relating to Project Management, but then our topic is Abraham, My Friend, not Abraham, My Project Manager.

The implied question in Abraham's conversation is "how shall these things be?" The question was asked by both Mary and Nicodemus, and the answer was always the same; God. Abraham will receive the same answer but it will be good to see how that answer arrived. The first verses of this chapter tell us that the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. But in the next words from God came not in a vision but in a conversation. Let's try to capture the moment. God broke into Abraham's consciousness with a vision and spoke to him. The encounter has developed into a conversation and in the conversation God will lead Abraham into more truth; let him who has ears to hear, hear. This is a genuine two-way conversation. God speaks, Abraham speaks, God speaks. The Bible gives us sufficient detail to feel the moment. The vision began in the tent and the conversation began there too. Now the two friends will take a little night-air; God leads Abraham outside.

#### elevation

This brings us to our third mini-heading; elevation. "Now, look up" says Abraham's friend. Or as the KJV has it "look now toward heaven, and tell (count) the stars, if thou be able to number them." Cities suffer from a very modern phenomenon called light pollution; it is difficult for modern city dwellers to count the stars. The world's lights make it possible to look down but not up. Profound isn't it? Lights which originate in the world obscure the heavenly lights. UK hymnwriter Graham Kendrick wrote a song highlighting the callousness of modern news coverage. In it he called the camera an "eye without tears", and called the whole process "the world's eye looking at the world's face". We are inundated with information. Sometimes in our prayer meetings we are inundated with information. Sometimes we need to hear God's voice saying, "now come outside, I want to show you something". Information is not revelation. Information does not generate faith, sometimes it obscures it. Sometimes doctrines do not generate faith, they obscure it. Information is only revelation when God says "now look at it".

At your next opportunity leave the city lights behind and head for the hills. If possible do it alone and not in a crowd, and look toward the heavens. Did you ever feel so small and insignificant? There's nothing that "puts us in our place" quite so effectively as standing under a starry sky. A shepherd boy did this three millennia ago in the Judean hills; When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained; What is man that You take thought of him, And the son of man that You care for him? (Psa 8:3-4 NASB) "...and on more than one occasion...The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, And night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; Their voice is not heard. (Psa 19:1-3 NASB) The starry heavens continued to declare the glory of God. Paul expounded this truth that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: (Rom 1:19-20 KJV) Nowhere are invisible things more clearly seen than in the starry heavens.

Abraham lifts his eyes to the starry heavens, and remembers that God is possessor of heaven and earth, and as he remembers God speaks again, "so shall thy seed be". Is anything too hard for the Lord? In the six-day creation account the stars do not get top billing. In fact their creation is recounted almost as an "aside"; he made the stars also. He made them, and he continues to own them. Abraham's unasked question is "how shall these things be?" The answer is "because the creator-God says so". This truth needs to find its counterpart in our personal experience. When God first speaks his promise the human instinct is often to become conscious of our helplessness. The spoken word of God makes a new perspective possible. Paul captures the moment in Rom 4: 19-21. And 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 Sara's womb: He staggered

d 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. (Rom 4:19-21 KJV)

confirmation

Let's turn to our last mini-heading; confirmation. Take careful note of these verses from Romans, they are the Bible's definition of justifying faith. What is faith? If we wanted to give the Bible answer to that question we would begin our reading of the Bible at Genesis. If we did so we would not meet the noun "faith" or the verb "believe" until we reached Genesis 15. This is the Bible's first mention of this concept; it is a good place to dig. The Hebrew word "believe" used in the Gen 15:6 is aman which means to confirm, and to build up as a column. It means to depend upon something as a building depends upon the foundation. It is the word from which we get "Amen". Abraham establishes himself on the sure foundation of God's word. There is a good illustration in an A B Simpson hymn; the chorus says...

I clasp the hand of love Divine,  
I claim the gracious promise mine,  
and add to His my countersign,  
"I take - He undertakes".

It is an illustration from forgotten banking legislation! In the UK, prior to the 1950s, all cheques (checks) had to be countersigned on the reverse of the cheque by the payee; without the payee's countersign the check was not valid. It was a kind of receipt, the payee acknowledging that he had received the amount of the cheque in cash, or by payment into his account. It is a shame that banking legislation changed, the illustration was perfect. Without my "confirmation" the promise was of no personal benefit to me. Abraham added his countersign; his response to God's promise was a hearty "Amen". The consequences of this countersign were breathtaking, and we will have to save them until the next devotional.

Can we now see the context of this transaction? It begins after these things, that is to say it is not the first step in God's revelation of Himself to Abraham. It begins with a personal "I-thou" encounter initiated by God as he breaks into Abraham's consciousness by revelation. Abraham enters into a conversation with God in which Abraham reveals his own conscious heart longings. The conversation continues as the two friends step outside and Abraham experiences spiritual elevation as he is directed to abandon earth-bound perspectives in favour of the heavenly. The "how" will be the sole responsibility of the Creator. Abraham countersigns the promise in confirmation by resting the full weight of his future destiny upon the words spoken personally to him by God. History's first "Amen" must set the pattern for all others.