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OBEDIENT FAITH

Genesis 12:4-9

By

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Genesis Lesson 26

Obedient Faith Genesis 12:4-9

One of the battles currently being waged in evangelical circles concerns the nature of saving faith. On the one hand are those who claim that if a person professes to believe in Christ as Savior, he is saved. There does not need to be any (or at least very little) confirming evidence in his life that his faith was genuine. According to this view, he could later become an atheist, but if he had previously professed faith in Christ, he is eternally saved.

The other side argues that we are saved by faith alone, but that such faith, if it is genuine, inevitably produces a life of growth in godliness. If a person professes to believe, but there is scant evidence in his life, his faith is not genuine. True saving faith produces good works. I believe that this is the clear teaching of Scripture. The debate is not inconsequential, since it concerns the heart of the gospel message.

In October, 1990, James Dobson in his monthly newsletter, was encouraged by a recent Gallup poll that indicated that 74 percent of Americans had made a personal commitment to Christ, up from 66 percent in 1988 and 60 percent in 1978. Dobson stated that even if only half of these are what may be considered valid spiritual commitments, the number was still encouraging.

I find it discouraging! In light of our social and moral decay, the numbers show that the gospel has become so watered down in our day that Americans have no idea what saving faith in Jesus Christ means. Can you imagine how different our country would be if only 25 percent, let alone 74 percent, of Americans were truly born again? Our entire society, beginning at the family level, would be transformed as people began to live in obedience to God's Word. Churches would be standing room only every Sunday. Missionaries would be going out in droves, all fully supported by the generosity of God's people.

During the First Great Awakening, in which thousands were truly converted under the preaching of men like George Whitefield

and Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Franklin, who was not converted, but who was impressed with the change Whitefield's preaching brought on society, wrote, "It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street." In our day, the high numbers professing to believe in Christ with no resulting change in behavior reflect a major problem, that there are droves of Americans who think they're saved, but they are not.

Since eternity is riding on the matter, it's crucial to understand what true biblical faith is. I often shudder at Jesus's words, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'" (Matt. 7:21-23.) How awful to hear those words! Here are people who not only claimed to be believers, they served the Lord. Even more, they performed works of power in His name. They thought they knew Him. But He didn't know them. To make sure we don't hear those words when we stand before the Lord, we must be clear on what the Bible teaches about saving faith, namely, that *saving faith is obedient faith*.

Obedient faith hears God's Word and acts upon it.

The life of Abraham, our father in the faith (Rom. 4:16), teaches this. When God told Abram to go forth from his country to the land He would show him, we read, "So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him" (Gen. 12:4). Abram heard what God said and acted upon it. That's biblical faith.

But right away we're presented with a question, because the rest of the sentence reads, "and Lot went with him." Lot was Abram's nephew (Gen. 11:27). But God's command to Abram was to go forth from his relatives (12:1). Did Abram only obey partially, which is not true obedience at all? It could be that Abram's faith was weak and his obedience only partial at this point. It is not until

Genesis 15:6 that we read that Abram “believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.” But on the other hand, Hebrews 11:8 states, “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.” So this seems to be the beginning point of Abram’s faith. And Genesis 12:4 does say that he went out “as the Lord had spoken to him.”

So I interpret the Lord’s command to Abram to leave his relatives to mean that he must obey the Lord in spite of what his relatives may do. If they could be persuaded to accompany him, that was fine. But if they would not go, Abram must go without them. It is similar to the Lord’s teaching that when it comes down to a choice between family and Christ, we must follow Christ (Luke 14:26). In Abram’s case, Lot was persuaded to accompany him. The rest stayed behind. But the important thing is, Abram heard and obeyed the Lord. “By faith Abraham ... obeyed” (Heb. 11:8).

1. Obedient faith hears God’s Word.

In verse 1 we read, “the Lord said”; in verse 4 we read that Abram went forth “as the Lord had spoken to him.” Before you can respond in obedient faith to the Lord you’ve got to hear what He is saying. In other words, faith is not some vague leap in the dark. It is an obedient response to God’s Word.

In Abram’s day, before the Bible was written, God often spoke to people in an audible voice. Sometimes the Lord also appeared in human form (a preincarnate appearance of Jesus Christ) and spoke to Abram as man to man (12:7; 18:1). While God is not limited and is able to speak to people today in an audible voice, or to appear to them, it is extremely rare. I have never had such an experience. I get a bit nervous with people who are always claiming, “The Lord told me” Usually they are living by faith in their feelings, not in the Lord.

So, how does God speak to us today? The book of Hebrews begins, “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son” (Heb. 1:1, 2). All of God’s revelation to us is summed up in the person of Jesus Christ. He is God’s Word to us (John 1:1). And how do we learn of Christ? Jesus said that the

Scriptures testify of Him (John 5:39; Luke 24:27). The Bible is God's revelation of Himself and His Son.

In addition to the Word, the Lord has given us His Spirit. The Holy Spirit takes the Word of God and applies it to our hearts as we yield to Him and wait on Him (John 14:26; 16:13-15; 1 Cor. 2:7-13). Most of the guidance you will ever need is contained in the Bible. You need wisdom from the Holy Spirit to apply it in various situations. But, if you're not assimilating God's Word into your thinking, the Holy Spirit cannot properly guide you. The Holy Spirit works through and in accordance with God's Word.

Years ago a friend who often said, "The Lord told me," said to me that the Lord had told him to divorce his wife. I grant that she was a difficult woman to live with. She would lock him out of the house and she treated him badly. On this occasion he told me that he had prayed about it and felt a peace that divorcing her was of the Lord. It took me about three hours to convince him that his peace was not from God, but rather it was the relief that comes from escaping a difficult situation. God's Word is clear that God hates divorce. The Spirit of God will not tell you to do something contrary to the Word of God.

On the other hand, it's possible to have God's Word in our heads, but not to be sensitive to God's Spirit to apply the Word in specific situations. We hear, but we don't hear. In Dallas Marla and I lived next to a four-lane freeway. We got so used to the noise that if we woke up on Sunday at 3 a.m., when there would be only one car every 15 or 20 seconds, it seemed strange to have it so quiet. We "heard" the cars constantly, but we really didn't hear them. We blocked out the noise.

Spiritually we often do the same thing. We develop the capacity to block out the Word from certain areas of our lives. We read it, or hear it preached, but we don't really hear it. Often we don't *want* to hear it, because it reveals major changes that need to take place in our lives. That's why as Jesus taught He often said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear"; or, "take care how you listen" (Luke 8:8, 18). Abram heard God's word to him. Obedient faith hears God's Word with a willingness to yield to the Lord in areas where we need to change.

2. Obedient faith acts on God's Word.

We read (12:5), "and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan." We can read those words easily enough and assume that it was no big deal for Abram to act on what God told him to do. But, as I mentioned last week, it wasn't easy. But Abram did what God told him to do.

Two dominant themes emerge from verses 6-9, both of which illustrate the life of obedient faith. The first theme is "*Abram the pilgrim*." We see it in 12:6, "Abram passed through the land." It is repeated in 12:8, "he proceeded from there ... and pitched his tent." A tent is not a permanent dwelling. It is again seen in 12:9, "Abram journeyed on" Here is a man on the move with no permanent roots, a man on a pilgrimage.

The second theme is "*Abram the worshiper and witness*." We see it in 12:7, when he builds an altar to the Lord who had appeared unto him. In 12:8 the impermanent "pitched his tent" is set against the more permanent, "built an altar." Abram the pilgrim, moving with his tent, didn't leave anything permanent for himself; but Abram the worshiper, after he had moved on, left behind altars unto the Lord, altars which bore witness to the pagan Canaanites in the land. Abram the worshiper bore witness to the strength behind his obedient faith by calling upon the name of the Lord (12:8). Let's apply these two themes:

A. Obedient faith means living as pilgrims.

A pilgrim is a person on a journey. He is not a settled resident. He's just passing through, on his way to a better place. God did not promise to give the land to Abram, but to his descendants. As John Calvin points out (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], 1:353), this means that the land was not his ultimate aim, but rather, heaven. Abram was looking for that city whose architect and builder is God (Heb. 11:10). He had to trust that God would make good on His word even though Abram would not live to see it.

That's what we're called to as Christians. We're not of this world. We are not to love the things of this world. We're just passing through. Our destination is heaven. As Paul said, "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:19). When we encounter any hardships, we have

to trust that God's promises about heaven are a sure thing. The pilgrim life means that we obey God whatever the hardships, knowing that our reward is in heaven. If we obey, like Abram, we'll have the Lord's presence and His promises of a glorious future, even if we never in our lifetime receive those promises.

The pilgrim life is often a difficult life, but obedient faith keeps on believing and obeying in spite of the hardships. Let me review some of the difficulties Abram faced in obeying God. He was 75 when he departed from Haran (12:4). While 75 in Abram's day was a lot younger than it is in our day, he wasn't a youth. He was married and had accumulated a number of possessions and servants (12:5). If moving with U-Haul is a hassle now, it was much harder then. It meant leaving a city and going across a desert to an uncertain location. There were bands of robbers and many other dangers along the way. He didn't know anything about Canaan before he set out. There wasn't an empty house waiting for them to move into.

No doubt Abram faced opposition from his family and friends. Knowing what we do of Sarah's personality, it's likely that she complained and even cried about the move. It's often hard on a wife to leave family and friends and to move to an unfamiliar place. Abram's older brother, Nahor, was living in Haran (Gen. 24:10; 27:43). I can hear him asking, "Now where is it you're going, Abram?" "I'm not sure. God told me to head for Canaan." "Canaan! Don't you know that there's nothing but desert between here and there? If you all don't die of thirst, the robbers will get you! Are you crazy?" "But God has told me to go, and I must obey Him. He will take care of us."

"But what more could you ask for than what you have here in Haran? You've got plenty of land, a nice house, servants, livestock, family, friends. What could you possibly gain by going to Canaan? And have you heard about the Canaanites? Those people sacrifice their children to their gods. They have sexual orgies at their temples. That's not a healthy environment to raise a family, Abram." But, in spite of all the hassles, the objections, the obstacles, and the risks, Abram obeyed God without excuses or protest. Obedient faith hears God's Word and acts on it.

So Abram obeyed God and lived happily ever after in a comfortable home in the land of Canaan. Is that what we read? No, we read that “the Canaanite was then in the land” (12:7). In verse 10 we read of something else in the land: a famine! What a welcome wagon: the Canaanites and a famine! Is that how God rewards those who hear His Word and act on it?

Yes, it often is. Moses obeyed God by going back to Egypt to lead His people out of captivity. What happened? Did Pharaoh say, “Have a good trip!”? Hardly. Did the Israelites say, “We’d love to follow you out into the wilderness, no matter how hard it is”? Not quite. Finally they left Egypt after God had inflicted the plagues on the Egyptians and parted the Red Sea and drowned Pharaoh’s army. Did Israel then find a beautiful garden spot to camp? “They went three days in the wilderness and found no water” (Exod. 15:22). A slight problem for two million people in the Sinai peninsula!

Every time I’ve obeyed God by moving to a new situation, I’ve encountered trials. When Marla and I moved to Dallas so that I could finish seminary, we were caught in a blizzard in southern New Mexico on the way. We got there and couldn’t find an apartment. We finally found one and were promptly mugged and I ended up with four stitches in my hand from the gun sight as it was ripped out of my hand. Other moves haven’t been that traumatic, but every time I’ve faced difficult trials in one form or another. Where did we ever get the idea that if we trust and obey God all our problems will evaporate? It’s certainly not in the Bible. Quite often when we start obeying God we have troubles we never dreamed of having before.

From this time on, Abram lived as a nomad in a tent, not in a house. He never owned a single piece of Canaan, except for the burial plot he bought for his wife. The only thing of permanence he left behind were some altars. That points to our other theme:

B. Obedient faith means living as worshipers and witnesses.

The tent shows him to be a pilgrim; the altar shows him to be a worshiper and a witness, claiming the land for God and His purposes. He built the first one at the oak of Moreh. It is possible that this was the spot of a heathen shrine. There Abram erected his altar

to the living God and bore witness to the godless Canaanites. When Abram “called on the name of the Lord” (12:8), it means that he openly acknowledged his trust in God as his strength and provider. He was raising the banner of the Lord’s name in a pagan land, declaring Him to be the only true God.

No doubt the pagans would have watched Abram curiously and asked, “Where is the god you’re sacrificing to? We don’t see any statues or images.” “No, my God is the living and true God, maker of heaven and earth. He cannot be represented by any man-made images.” Perhaps Abram bore witness to them of how we cannot approach the holy God without the shedding of blood. Perhaps he told them of God’s judgment during Noah’s day and warned them of judgment if they did not turn to God.

As far as we know, the Canaanites for the most part, ignored Abram and continued in their wicked ways. In His great mercy, God spared those wicked people for 700 more years until Joshua’s day. But Abram the worshiper had borne witness to them. God will use those who live as pilgrims and worshipers in the midst of a pagan land to bear witness for Him. Some will be saved; some will mock or ignore the message. But God will use the witness of His pilgrims at the day of judgment to vindicate His justice.

Conclusion

A gray-haired old lady, long a member of her church, shook hands with the pastor after the Sunday morning service. “That was a wonderful sermon,” she told him, “just wonderful. Everything you said applies to someone I know.”

Obedient faith hears what God’s Word is saying *to me*, and it responds with appropriate action. It begins with hearing the gospel, that salvation is not by my merit or good deeds, but rather that salvation is from the Lord. He has provided everything to reconcile sinners with Himself. Repenting of my pride and disobedience and abandoning all trust in myself, I cast myself completely upon Christ. Such saving faith results in a new life in which I obey God in response to His great love for me.

Obedient faith goes on growing by searching God’s Word and allowing it to search me. When God puts His finger on an area of sin, obedient faith responds, even if it is difficult or inconvenient.

Obedient faith lets go of this evil world and begins a pilgrimage toward heaven. It worships God by calling upon Him and it bears witness of God to this pagan world. Wherever God is speaking to you, hear what He's saying and act on it. That's obedient faith. Without such faith, it is impossible to please the Lord.

Discussion Questions

1. How can we tell if faith is genuine? What evidence is needed?
2. Discuss the statement, "If Christ is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all." Is it biblically sound?
3. How can we keep our hearts sensitive to God's Word?
4. How can we live as pilgrims and keep ourselves free from loving the things of this world? What does this mean practically?

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