

FAITH CONQUERING FEAR

by Ray C. Stedman

The opening paragraph of Genesis 15 strikingly illustrates for us what is commonly called in Bible study, "the law of first occurrence." By this is meant that the first time a word or phrase is used in the Bible, it is used in such a way or in such a context as to highlight the basic meaning of it throughout the rest of Scripture. Four such phrases appear in this paragraph for the first time in the Bible, though they are repeated many, many times afterward. See if you can recognize them:

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord God, what wilt thou give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus" And Abram said, "Behold, thou hast given me no offspring; and a slave born in my house will be my heir." And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Gen. 15:1-6 {RSV})

1. Did you catch the first one, in the very first line, "the word of the Lord came"? The recurrence of this phrase many times afterward in Scripture emphasizes the God-breathed character of the Bible. The word of the Lord came to many men, just as it came to Abram, and they wrote as they were borne along by the Holy Spirit, and then actually sat down and studied their own writings to learn what God had said, (cf, 1 Pet 1:10-12 {RSV}).
2. The second phrase is the word that came to Abram, "Fear not!" How often this is God's word to man, throughout this book.
3. The third phrase is, "I am your shield." In a thousand wonderful variations, we find this thought repeated frequently: God is our refuge and our strength; God is a tower of refuge; God is an overshadowing rock; blessed is he that hides under the shadow of the Almighty. This is the first intimation of this character of God in Scripture.
4. And then there is that familiar word in the last verse, "And he believed the Lord; and it was reckoned to him for righteousness." The fires of the Reformation were lit from that ringing phrase!

The heart of this passage does not lie in its great phrases, however, but in its connection with the preceding events of Abram's life. God appears to Abram in a vision, but when he comes, his first words are, "Fear not!" This reveals what is going on in Abram's heart. He was having a sleepless night and the trouble was that he was afraid. Coming, as this incident does, after Abram's return from his battle with the four eastern kings and his encounter with the king of Sodom, we can see why he is so fearful. He is afraid of this man, Chedorlaomer, the great king whom he had conquered. Abram had publicly humiliated him by overthrowing his vast army with but a handful of men. Dictators do not take this kind of treatment lightly!

We can easily understand the justified fear that Abram felt as he faced the possibility of Chedorlaomer's return. No doubt he said to himself, "What have I gotten myself into now? I am almost sorry that I won this battle, for when he comes back what am I going to do? I won't be able to catch him off guard another time." So fear fills his heart.

Perhaps also there was fear because he had turned down the king of Sodom's offer of a fortune. He did it, of course, in the strength of the fellowship he had enjoyed with Melchizedek. With his heart aflame with the love and grace of God, Abram had said to this king, "I want nothing of all that you have. I don't want you saying that you made Abram rich." So the king went back to Sodom with all his riches and now Abram is back in his

tent, experiencing a very human reaction. After the wealth and luxury of Sodom that tent must have looked awfully shabby. The wind was howling around it, and the sand was sifting through its cracks. Doubt begins to rise in his heart as to whether he did the right thing or not. And doubt is a form of fear!

If all this sounds familiar to you, take comfort from the fact that it is a very natural reaction and all the great saints of God suffer from it. If there has been a time when you have taken a stand for God in the strength of his grace, supplied to you at that moment, and yet later, you wondered if you did the right thing, that is only what you might expect. In Abram's heart there was this clutching fear as to what would happen when Chedorlaomer came back, along with a probing doubt as to whether he had made a wise decision or played the fool by throwing away the wealth of Sodom.

Still further, deep down in his heart was a lurking loneliness, a gnawing fear that he had somehow misunderstood the promises of God. It had been ten years since God had said to him, "Abram, I am going to give you a son. His descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth, and you shall become the father of many nations." Ten years of waiting had passed. "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick," says the proverb {Prov 13:12a KJV}. The sickness was beginning to creep into his soul a little.

We may gather from his words that he was beginning to wonder if perhaps the Lord had meant he would give him an heir, but it would not necessarily be his own son. Perhaps it would be a foster son, even a servant such as Eliezer whom he had bought in Damascus. On this sleepless night, I think the old man was trying to adjust to this possible solution, but he could not quiet that sense of loneliness and disappointment within. So he tossed and turned in a mounting spiral of fear and doubt and loneliness.

I am sure if this had happened to us, we would have taken a couple of aspirin or tranquilizers and gone back to sleep. If he had, of course, he would have missed the whole marvelous revelation of God's love! There are times when Christians are perfectly justified in using tranquilizers, but there are also many times when to do so is to miss God's purpose in trial. To run to the drug cabinet whenever anything goes wrong, to be unwilling to allow any unrest or bit of tension, to insist that life must maintain a steady, even keel at all costs, under every circumstance, is to thwart and miss the very purpose for which God sends difficulties into our lives. He only desires to create an atmosphere where he can manifest his glory.

Now suddenly, as Abram tosses on his bed at night in his tent, there comes a sense of a presence with him. In his heart, he hears that mysterious word of the Lord. Sometimes the Lord spoke audibly to these Old Testament men; sometimes it was in the heart, with a quiet, deep conviction that God is speaking. Every Christian who has ever walked in fellowship with Jesus Christ for very long knows what I mean. We are not told how God spoke to Abram, but in the midst of his fear and doubt and loneliness there comes a sense of relief and the word of the Lord says, "Fear not, Abram. I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward. I am the sufficient answer to all your fear!"

Of course, God is the answer! If God be for us, who can be against us? If God is our shield, whom should we fear? I love that verse in Hebrews, "He has said, 'I will never fail you nor forsake you.' Hence we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid; what can man do to me?'" (Hebrews 13: 5b-6 {RSV}).

"I am thy shield." That is what comforted Abram's heart there in the darkness. It was all he needed to settle his worries about the return of Chedorlaomer and the loss of his fortune in Sodom.

Have you learned yet to count on the invisible protection of God? Can you stand before danger as our Lord did before Pilate and say in John 19:11b {RSV}, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above." Oh, the sense of the invisible shield of God! As someone has well put it, the Christian is immortal until his work is done. Nothing can touch him nor hurt him except it come by permission of God, who is a living shield around him. We would lose most of our fears if we realized this. Each believer is as safe as one of those TV western stars in the midst of a gun fight! You know that the star of the program is not going to die. It may look as though he is in mortal danger, but he never really is. (Not, at least, until the sponsor is ready to drop the show!)

How many times it seems that we live charmed lives. A number of years ago, my wife and I were driving across New Mexico. We were in a wild and lonely country, driving along about sixty miles an hour. For some time, I had heard a continuous grinding noise. On my car that was not unusual, but I finally decided that this was a little out of the ordinary and stopped to investigate. I noticed the hub of the right front tire was hot and smoking. I jacked up the car, and when the weight was lifted, the front wheel fell off and rolled into the ditch. We had heard that grinding noise for some ten miles, and to this day, I am certain that the wheel was kept on throughout that distance simply because of the protection of God.

This is what God is saying to Abram -- I am your shield. Abram, a practical defense against any force that would destroy you. Fear not. Nothing shall touch you unless I permit it. Do not fear -- I AM! Have you noticed how many times in the New Testament our Lord Jesus calms his disciples with these words, "Fear not"? And the ground of his reassurance is always that he is with them. When the storm threatens to overwhelm the little boat; when the cold fist of fear clutches their hearts as they sense the shadow of the Cross on their path; when Peter goes weeping bitterly out into the night; his words ring in their ears -- "Fear not." "Let not your hearts be troubled," (John 14:1a {RSV}). Why? "You believe in God, believe also in me!" {John 14:1b RSV}.

But God is more than a shield. He says also to Abram, "I am your exceeding great reward." (The rendering of the Authorized Version is to be preferred here.) God is our dearest treasure, the only genuinely satisfying joy we will ever know.

The other evening my wife and I were invited to a neighborhood party, and we welcomed the opportunity to become a bit better acquainted with our neighbors. We discovered when we arrived that it was a cocktail party, and it had been in progress for an hour or so before we joined it. We were greeted warmly, not to say hilariously, at the door and soon were being introduced to many of our new neighbors, most of whom were in a quite cheerful mood, to all appearances having the time of their lives. But I could soon see that it was all highly artificial. Though there was an outward attempt at happiness and enjoyment, there was also written on every face a haunting emptiness, an expression of meaninglessness and futility. We were both struck by this. They were doggedly determined to have a good time, and insisted they were doing so, despite the hunger and desperation evident in every word and glance. We felt so sorry for those dear people. We said afterwards that we would not trade one moment of the riches of grace in Christ for a whole lifetime of that kind of enjoyment. The sense of the presence of God is a far richer experience of joy than anything else the human heart can find.

This is what Abram experienced when God said to him, "I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward." And we never again read of Abram worrying about Chedorlaomer or the loss of Sodom's wealth. All these pressures from without were fully met by the sense of God's presence with him, there in the dark.

Ah, but that other request that is in his heart! That vacuum of loneliness within. Could God fill that? And there comes blurring out of the heart of Abram these words, "O Lord God, what will thou give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus." In the intimacy of that moment, he simply poured out what was in his heart into the ear of his Almighty Friend. And God said, "Get up and come outside with me." And he led him out into the soft oriental night, and together they looked up into the stars, wheeling in their silent courses above them. Abram must have felt something of the awe of spirit which comes to those who see the blazing heavens at night and sense the insignificance of man. There God said to him, "Abram, I am going to give you a son. Your servant will not be your heir. I will give you a son and that son shall have sons, and they in turn will beget sons, and you will have a great host of descendants. Now look up at the stars and tell me how many there are, for if you can number the stars, you will be able to number your descendants, for just so many will there be."

This is a great promise, out of the greatness of God's heart. It must surely have reassured and encouraged Abram. Each night to come, until the promise was fulfilled, he could look up into the starlit heavens and remind himself of the promise God had made.

There is something of great interest here. The last time God had spoken to Abram about the birth of a son, he had promised him he would make his descendants like the dust of the earth. But now the promise is that they shall be like the stars of the heaven in multitude. Many Bible scholars have seen in this an inference that Abram

would have two lines of descendants: an earthly seed and a heavenly one. The earthly seed would be the nation Israel, along with the Ishmaelite (Arabian) nations. But there would also be a heavenly or spiritual seed. That "Seed," we are told in the book of Galatians, was Christ and all those who through faith in him would be called the sons of God.

As we look back now from our 20th century vantage point, we can see how God has fulfilled these promises to the letter. There is an earthly seed, but there is also a heavenly one, a great uncounted host of spiritual descendants of Abraham, like the stars of the heaven in multitude. Paul says in Galatians 3:7 {RSV}, "So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham."

Now the last statement in this interesting paragraph in Genesis 15 comes before us. It concerns Abram's faith. "And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." Paul refers to this mighty act of faith in Romans 4. He reminds us that Abraham believed God before he was circumcised, that is, before he had any continual guarantee that God would do this thing. The account of Abram's circumcision comes a couple of chapters later. Paul infers from this that acceptance before God has nothing to do with circumcision, as the Jews were insisting. Paul says that when Abram heard God say, "So shall your descendants be" that he looked up into the stars, saw their vastness, their multitude, and relaxed -- resting in faith upon the power of God.

If we focus our view on Abram's faith, we are going to miss the point of this whole matter. There is a sense in which we make far too much of these men of old and their faith. "What mighty men of faith," we say; "how tremendous to believe God against all the evidence of the circumstances around. If we only had faith like that we could do the things they did!" Then we compare our feeble faith with theirs and try to work up a feeling of faith within us until we are turned into spiritual hypochondriacs, always going about taking our spiritual temperature and feeling our spiritual pulse. It is indeed true that when God saw Abram's faith, it was reckoned to him for righteousness, but it is also true that when Abram saw God, he reckoned him able to perform what he had promised, and so was able to rest his faith on God's adequacy.

What was it that made his faith so strong? The answer is that he did not look at the difficulty so much as he looked at the One who had promised. His eye was not resting on the problems, but upon the Promiser. When he saw the greatness of God, the might and majesty displayed before him on that oriental summer's night, he said to himself, "It makes no difference how I feel, nor what may be the difficulties involved, the Creator of that multitude of stars is quite capable of giving me an equal number of descendants."

Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees
And looks to God alone,
Laughs at impossibilities,
And cries, "It shall be done!"

So we read the great sentence, "He believed God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness." This does not mean that this was the first moment that Abram was reckoned righteous before God -- that is, this is not the moment of his spiritual regeneration. The book of Hebrews makes clear that when he left Ur of the Chaldees, in response to God's command, his obedient faith was also reckoned to him for righteousness. This incident under the stars is simply one instance out of many which illustrates the way in which God reckons righteousness to the man who believes. Abram did not attain a righteous standing by the might of God to do what he had promised, he won immediate favor in God's sight and the righteousness of Christ was imputed to him. Abram believed God about the promise of a coming son, and was reckoned righteous by faith.

Today we are exhorted to believe God about the Son who has already come, and when we cease our own works and rest in helpless dependence upon that Living Son, we too are counted righteous by faith. And that act of faith which first introduces us to the power of God exercised on our behalf, must become an attitude of faith governing each moment of our life.

Do not think you have come to the end of the road when you believe in Jesus Christ. You are then standing at the beginning, and every experience of the power of God in your life must come from a fresh appropriation by faith of the promise of God.

Prayer

Our Father, what wonderful lessons come to us from this book and these lives of men of old! How wonderful that in this 20th century we may discover this same truth and be children of Abraham today. Teach us the folly of self-dependence and the glory of God dependence. In every moment of fear, lead us to cast ourselves upon you, reckoning upon your promise to be our shield and our exceeding great reward. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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