

Sabbath School Lesson #5 – The Faith of Abraham – 28 October-3 November 2017

Christ would have us believe in Him, as did Abraham also believe. Our memory text reads: “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law” (Romans 3:31). Our study this week is derived from Romans 3:20, 31; 4:1-17. In this passage, Paul fully explains that Abraham was not justified by his works, but by faith that works.

Sunday: The Law – Faith does not void but establishes the law. Making void the law does not mean abolishing it. There is no question as to the perpetuity of the law. It is so plainly eternal that the apostle Paul never wastes space in arguing about it. The only question is as to how its claim may be satisfied. The Saviour said that the Jews made the commandment of God of none effect through their tradition. So far as they were concerned, they made it void. No man could by any action or lack of action abolish or in any way affect the law of God. Anybody may by his unbelief obliterate it from his own heart. The question then is, Do we by faith make the law of God of none effect? Or, more plainly still, Does faith lead to the transgression of the law? Not by any means! No action of man can make the law anything different from what it actually is. It is the foundation of the throne of God; it will ever abide, in spite of demons and men. But it is left for us to say whether or not we will have it obliterated from our hearts, or have it established there. If we choose to have it established in our hearts, we have only to accept Christ by faith. Faith brings Christ to dwell in the heart (Ephesians 3:17). The law of God is in the heart of Christ (Psalms 40:8), so that the faith which brings Christ into the heart establishes the law there. And since the law of God is the establishment of His throne, the faith which brings the law into the heart, enthrones God there. And thus it is that God works in men “both to will and to do of His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).

“As Pertaining to the Flesh.” Abraham was not the father, or ancestor, according to the flesh, of all those to whom Paul addressed the epistle. If Abraham were justified by works, he might glory; but the fact is that he could not glory before God; and the proof of this is found in the words of Scripture: “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Romans 4:3). A man can be justified by works when it can be shown that he has done no wrong. In that case he needs no faith; his works speak for themselves. But Abraham was justified by faith, and therefore it is evident that he was not justified by any works. He who is justified only by the works of God, will glory only in those works. That is glorying in God, and is far different from glorying before God.

Some may quote the words of James, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?” (James 2:21); this is often quoted as a disparagement of the words of Paul. Some think there is a contradiction between Paul and James, imagining James to teach that there is some merit in their own works. There is no contradiction in Scripture. No one need hope to come to an understanding of the Scriptures until he approaches them with the settled conviction that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God.” The Holy Spirit does not at one time inspire words which must later on be corrected. James says, “Seest thou how *faith wrought* with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And *the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness*: and he was called the friend of God” (James 2:22-23). Here, when Abraham worked, it was his faith that was working; and those works by which he was justified were simply the fulfilment of the scripture, “Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness.” The works were the product of his faith, and showed that he had it in perfection. Faith includes everything that a man can do to please God; for “without faith it is impossible to please Him” (Hebrews 11:6). “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only” (verse 24). That is, a man is justified by the works of faith, and not by dead faith, which does not work. In this, James and Paul are fully agreed.

Monday: Debt or Grace? – “Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.” It is necessary to keep in mind what the apostle is writing about. The subject is the means by which a man is justified. To him that works for justification, the reward of righteousness is not a gift of grace, but the payment of a debt. That is, it would be so if there were any righteousness by works. In that case, the man would come to the Lord and demand of Him his due. But no man can put the Lord under obligation to him. “Who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again?” (Romans 11:35). If any one could do something for the Lord for which the Lord would be under obligation to him, then all things would not be from Him. That is to say, the idea of justification by works is opposed to the fact that God is the Creator of all things. And, conversely, the recognition of God as Creator is the acknowledgement that righteousness comes from Him alone. God justifies the ungodly. No others need justification. But mark that He does not justify

ungodliness. That would be to call evil good, and to deny Himself. But He justifies or makes righteous the ungodly, and that is just what they need. He justifies the believing sinner by making him a new man in Christ Jesus, and this He can do and still be just. To make a new man in righteousness is perfectly in harmony with His own character as Creator. "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." Bear in mind that justification is the subject under consideration. When the apostle speaks of not working, it is evident that he means not working in order to be justified. A man is not made just by works, but the just man works yet always by faith. "The just shall live by faith." It is faith that makes him continue to live justly. The reality of the works of faith is made more prominent in Romans four.

Tuesday: The Promise – Speaking of Christ, the apostle says, "All the promises of God in Him are yea, and in Him amen, unto the glory of God by us" (2 Corinthians 1:20). There is no promise of God to any man that ever lived on earth, or that will ever live, except through Jesus Christ. The promises to Israel, especially, which most concern us are those that were first made to Abraham. But "he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness" (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3). Therefore "if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29). So, then, the promise to Israel come through the cross of Christ; and none are Israel except those who have personal, saving faith in Him. Speaking of how the promise came to Abraham, the apostle says, "For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith" (Romans 4:13).

Wednesday: Law and Faith – In Galatians 3:21-23, Paul explains the relationship between law and faith. Paul starts by asking: "Is the law then against the promises of God?" – Not by any means! Far from it! If it were, it would not be in the hands of a Mediator, Christ; for all the promises of God are in Him (2 Corinthians 1:20). So we find the law and the promise combined in Christ. We may know that the law was not and is not against the promises of God, from the fact that God gave both the promise and the law. We know, also, that the giving of the law introduced no new element into the covenant, since, having been confirmed, nothing could be added to or taken from it. But the law is not useless, else God would not have given it. It is not a matter of indifference whether we keep it or not, for God commands it. But, all the same, it is not against the promise, and brings no new element in. Why? – Simply because the law is in the promise. The promise of the Spirit includes this: "I will put My laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts" (Hebrews 8:10).

And this is what God indicated had been done for Abraham when "He gave him the covenant of circumcision" (read Romans 4:11; 2:25-29; Philippians 3:3). The promise that Abraham and his seed should inherit the world, was "through the righteousness of faith" (Romans 4:13). But the law is righteousness, as God says: "Harken unto Me, ye that know righteousness, the people in whose heart is My law" (Isaiah 51:7). So, then, the righteousness which the law demands is the only righteousness that can inherit the promised land, but it is obtained, not by the works of law, but by faith. The righteousness of the law is not attained by human efforts to do the law, but by faith (Romans 9:30-32). Therefore, the greater the righteousness which the law demands, the greater is seen to be the promise of God; for He has promised to give it to all who believe. Yea, He has sworn it. When, therefore, the law was spoken from Sinai, "out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice," accompanied by the sounding of the trumpet of God, and with the whole earth quaking at the presence of the Lord and all His holy angels, thus indicating the inconceivable greatness and majesty of the law of God, it was, to every one who remembered the oath of God, but a revelation of the wondrous greatness of God's promise; for all the righteousness which the law demands, He has sworn to give to every one who trusts Him.

Thursday: The Law and Sin – Christ says, "I am the door" (John 10:7-9). Outside of Christ, the man is "holden with the cords of his sins" (Proverbs 5:22). "The strength of sin is the law" (1 Corinthians 15:56). The law declares a man to be a sinner, makes him conscious of his condition. "By the law is the knowledge of sin;" and "sin is not imputed when there is no law" (Romans 3:20; 5:13). The law forms a sinner's prison walls, close in on the sinner, making him feel uncomfortable, oppressing him with a sense of sin, as though they would press his life out. In vain he makes frantic efforts to escape his prison. Those commandments stand as firm as the everlasting hills. Whichever way he turns he finds a commandment which says to him, 'You can find no freedom by me, for you have sinned.' If he seeks to make friends with the law, and promises to keep it, he is no better off, for his sin still remains. The law goads him and drives him to the only way of escape – "the promise by faith of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 3:22). If a man accepts the preaching of the law, in Christ he is made "free indeed," for in Christ he is made the righteousness of God.