

IMITATE THE FAITH OF YOUR FATHERS

3⁵He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, does he do so because of your observance of the law or because you believed [the message] your heard? ⁶[From the fact that] Abraham “believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness,” ⁷[you must] understand that those who have faith, they are the sons of Abraham. ⁸The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, announced the good news in advance to Abraham, [proclaiming,] “All the nations shall be blessed through you.” ⁹So then, those who have faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. (Gal. 3:5-9)*

*Literally, “*by works of law*”

Introduction

The well-known hymn, *Faith of Our Fathers*, reminds us to put the emphasis in the right place: to focus our attention on the Christian faith of our forefathers. That hymn can serve to remind us that what is truly significant about our forefathers is the Christian faith they possessed: the faith by which they lived; the faith for which many of them suffered, and some of them died; the faith by which they were saved, their personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The churches of Galatia needed to regain that focus. They needed to understand that what was truly significant about Abraham—the great forefather of Israel—was his faith in Christ. Jewish teachers had come to Galatia and were teaching these Gentile Christians that if they hoped to share in the blessing of salvation they must become part of Abraham’s family: they would need to be circumcised and accept the Jewish lifestyle. Thus they would become “adopted” sons of Abraham and so share in the religious heritage of the Jews.

The Apostle Paul informs these Gentile Christians that what was truly significant about Abraham was his faith in Christ; and if they hoped to share in the blessing of salvation they must share in the faith of Abraham.

Transferring and applying these things to our own day, we must understand that what gives us access to the blessing of salvation is not religious heritage, but personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We may sum it up like this: Rather than putting your faith in your forefathers, you must imitate their faith in Christ.

I. Imitate the Faith of Your Fathers, Because They were Saved by Faith (3:6-7)

It was an established fact, taught in the Scriptures, that Abraham was the friend of God. King Jehoshaphat prays, “*O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?*” (2 Chron. 20:7.) Furthermore, it was the clear teaching of

Scripture that Abraham was the earthly father of God's people. In Genesis 17:7-8 we hear the LORD declare to Abraham,

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. ⁸The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God. (Genesis 17:7-8)

But the Apostle Paul emphasizes that it is very important to understand the basis of Abraham's relationship with God and to understand who are Abraham's true spiritual children who share with him in the blessing of God.

In verse 6 Paul points out that Abraham was justified by faith. The apostle quotes Genesis 15:6, "*Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness.*" Abraham had no righteousness of his own; he had no personal merit before God. The LORD accepted Abraham on the basis of Abraham's faith: Abraham trusted the LORD's word and the LORD's ability to fulfill His purpose and promise. Thus Paul is arguing that it is the clear teaching of Scripture that Abraham was justified by faith (in the LORD,) not by works that he produced and presented to the LORD.

Furthermore, the Scripture makes it clear that Abraham believed and was justified before he received the sacrament of circumcision. The sacrament of circumcision is first introduced in Genesis 17; the LORD instituted the sacrament of circumcision some 13 years after the events recorded in Genesis 15, the passage that declares that Abraham was justified by faith. Thus, Abraham was already justified and accepted before the Lord God some 13 years prior to the institution of the sacrament of circumcision. Circumcision, therefore, was not the basis or the reason for Abraham's justification; rather, it was a sign and seal confirming his justification; note Romans 4:11, "*[Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.*"

In the New Testament era, one must not trust in the sacrament of baptism; rather, we must understand that one's baptism is the sign and seal of one's saving relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ. Baptism is visibly illustrating the saving work accomplished by Christ and the baptized person's relationship to Christ—rather than trust in the sign, we must always trust in the person of Christ Himself and be confident of what He has done for us. By way of illustrating the relationship between the sacrament as sign and seal and the person of Christ Himself, we may consider the following example: If we possess a coupon that entitles us to a free meal at a local restaurant, we do not eat the coupon; we go to the restaurant and eat the meal that it offered—the coupon points us to the restaurant and affirms that we have the permission to eat a meal there.

Paul appeals to the Scriptures to show that Abraham's justification (his acquittal or acceptance with God) was not based on personal merit that he was able to offer to God, nor was it based on religious sacraments or ceremonies. On the contrary, his justification was based on his faith in the Lord: faith in what the Lord said He would do and what He ultimately accomplished by the atoning work of Christ at Calvary. Jesus said to the Jews, *"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad"* (Jn. 8:56.)

Having dealt with the question, How was Abraham justified (accepted by God?), in verse 7 Paul goes on to deal with the next question, Who are the true sons of Abraham? The heretical teachers who were troubling the churches of Galatia claimed that they were the children of Abraham. Only by submitting to circumcision and accepting the Jewish lifestyle could the Gentiles become "adopted" children of Abraham.

The Pharisees, that sect of the Jews with whom the heretical teachers had close ties, put their pride and confidence in the fact that they were the physical descendants of Abraham. But what these men failed to realize was that there is not only a physical relationship with Abraham, there is also a spiritual relationship—and it is the spiritual relationship alone that is all-important with regard to salvation. During His earthly ministry the Lord Jesus confronted the Jews with this very truth. The Jews declared, *"We are Abraham's descendants and have never [to this day] been in slavery to anyone. How can you say, You will become free?"* (Jn. 8:33.) But Jesus replied,

I know that you are Abraham's descendants; nevertheless, you are trying to kill me, because my word finds no place in you. ³⁸I am relating the things I have seen in my Father's presence; and you are doing the things you have heard from your father. ³⁹They responded by saying to him, Our father is Abraham. Jesus said to them, If you were Abraham's children, you would do the things Abraham did. ⁴⁰But now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth I heard from God. Abraham would not have done that. (Jn. 8:37-40)

The Jews confidently asserted that they were *"Abraham's descendants"*—they were Abraham's physical descendants (Jn. 8:33.) Jesus acknowledges that they were *"Abraham's descendants"* (Jn. 8:37,) but He denies that they are *"Abraham's children"* (Jn. 8:39.) He points out that if they really were Abraham's children, like Abraham, they would listen to and accept the Word of God, which He was presenting to them (Jn. 8:39-40.) Thus, Jesus is pointing out that there is a distinction between having a natural relationship with Abraham (being merely a physical descendant of Abraham) and having a spiritual relationship to Abraham (sharing his faith in the LORD and his fellowship with the LORD.)

This is the very truth the Apostle Paul is emphasizing here in Galatians 3:7; namely, those who trust in the LORD are the true children of Abraham. A man may have the same blood running through his veins that Abraham had, but that is

inconsequential when it comes to spiritual matters. What a man needs is to have the same faith in his heart that Abraham had, that alone gives one a true spiritual affinity with Abraham.

By way of contemporary application: We must each one personally and individually possess the same saving faith in Christ as our forefathers. We must not put our trust in being part of the religious heritage passed down from our forefathers, putting our confidence in the fact that “my own name is recorded in the same church role as my godly grandfather.” We must not put our trust in the mere fact that we happen to be the physical offspring of godly forefathers, putting our confidence in the fact that “Dad had a great relationship with the LORD, I am his son/daughter, so I guess the LORD will accept me, too, for dad’s sake because I am his child.” Rather than putting our faith in our forefathers and whatever religious heritage we may have received from them, we must imitate their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

II. Imitate the Faith of Your Fathers, Even If You Don’t Have Such Earthly Fathers (3:8-9)

Up to this point the apostle has demonstrated that it is not enough for a man to be merely a physical descendant of Abraham; rather, it is essential that the man possess the same faith in the LORD that Abraham had. But someone might raise the question, What about the Gentiles? It is evident that a Jew must go beyond merely physical descent from Abraham to spiritual affinity with Abraham, but what about the Gentiles who do not have any physical descent as a starting point? Are they left out?

Once again Paul provides the answer from Scripture, this time quoting Genesis 12:3. In that passage the LORD declared to Abraham, “*All the nations shall be blessed through you.*” Abraham is the source of blessing because it would be from his lineage that the promised Savior would come. The LORD asserts, “*all the nations*” shall be blessed through Abraham. The blessing of salvation is promised not only to Abraham’s direct descendants, but to all who possess the same faith as Abraham. So, by means of Scripture, Paul demonstrates that physical descent from Abraham is not a necessary prerequisite for becoming a true spiritual son of Abraham.

By way of contemporary application, we may ask the question, What about those who have no godly believing forefathers? What about those who, unlike Bruce Wilkinson, have no examples of living faith in Christ that may be imitated? Bruce Wilkinson was raised in a devoted Christian household. “As a child, I would always see my father and mother reading the Bible,” he notes fondly. “Or I would stumble into the living room in the morning and see my father on his knees, praying. It was a constant pattern. Those images stayed with me for forty years. Though my faith was tested years later, growing up with parents who believed strongly in the Bible ... provided a fertile environment for a child.”

What about those who, unlike Timothy, have had no encouragement and instruction in the way of salvation from a young age? The Apostle Paul reminds Timothy of his godly heritage:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it,¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise with regard to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim. 3:14-15)

Those who have no godly forefathers who have set an example of true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ may simply look directly to Christ Himself—the promise of salvation is offered to all and to any who will come to Christ and trust in Him.

In verse 9 Paul sums up his argument: *“So then, those who have faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.”*

Conclusion

Are you trusting in the religious heritage and tradition passed down to you by your forefathers? Don't trust in them and that heritage; rather, imitate their faith in Christ.

Are you trusting in the sacraments and the observance of religious practices? The sacraments are signs that point you to Christ and seals that can only be effective if they are confirming faith in Christ.

Are you trusting in yourself and any supposed merit you may assume to possess? Don't seek to futilely produce your own personal merit; rather, trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and His perfect, divine merit.

Or, like Abraham, are you trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for your salvation? If so, you are a true child of Abraham and share in the blessing of salvation that he received from God by faith.