

WHAT IS THE FAITH THAT SAVES?

When Paul spoke to the Jewish people of Antioch and explained the Good News from God some of the things he said make us pause for thought. Asking questions as you read the Bible is a very helpful way of identifying what you know and what you don't. Write down any questions you might have and you may get help from other people in due course or you may find that, as you continue to read, the answers will come from other Scriptures.

Here are some of the questions identified earlier when we thought about what the apostle taught. We asked:

- a Why God chose Israel as His special nation and whether or not the Jews are still important in the purpose of God.
- b Why King David is so important in God's purpose that the New Testament begins with an immediate reference back to him and to Abraham (Matthew 1:1).
- c What the Scriptures say about David's special descendant.
- d What God promised "to the fathers" about the work that Jesus would accomplish.
- e If forgiveness comes as a result of what we believe, what exactly do we have to believe to be saved?

We can now begin to find answers to all these questions; for Paul has reached the point in his Letter to the Romans when he tells us more about faith. In doing so he concentrates upon just two Old Testament characters – Abraham and King David.

❖ Faithful Abraham

Abraham is the father of the Jewish nation. His son was named Isaac. Isaac had a son named Jacob who, in turn, had twelve sons; the families of those sons became the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. But there is something even more important about Abraham. At a time when the earth was given over to idol worship, Abraham responded to God's call and left the city where he was living to go somewhere that God would show him. He responded because he was willing to believe God and to put his trust in Him. It was a remarkable act of faith:

"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:8-10).

This response made Abraham a pioneer in spiritual matters. He did not live for the present but for the future and he became confident that God would give him and his descendants a lasting and deep-rooted inheritance, described here as "the city that has foundations".

In Romans chapter 4, Paul calls Abraham "the father of all who believe", "the father of us all", and "the father of many nations" (4:11,16,17). He looks at several episodes in Abraham's life – the times when God made promises to Abraham, which he believed implicitly; his circumcision; and the long period when he and Sarah got older and older and waited for the child that God had promised them.

❖ Life of Faith

You can read Abraham's entire life story from the end of Genesis chapter 11 to chapter 25 (just fifteen chapters in all) and it is a very worthwhile exercise. If you do so you will follow Abraham's journeying from Ur of the Chaldees (in modern Iraq) to Haran (now in Syria) and then to Canaan (now known as Israel). He came with his family and some servants, together with flocks and herds, and they settled into a nomadic life as shepherds, grazing wherever there was common land available and moving on from time to time. Over the years he had several wives, as was customary at that time, and as his family grew so life became more complicated for him. He lived at the time when God expressed His displeasure by destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities which had become extremely immoral and totally godless, and Abraham witnessed that.

Abraham is described as "a friend of God" and we need to concentrate on that aspect of his life. How did he become right with God? Was it because he left Ur although he did not know where the journey would end? Was he God's friend because of the things he did? Paul says emphatically that was not the case.

"What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does

the Scripture say? **‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’** Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but **trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness**” (Romans 4:1-5).

Abraham’s faith was a saving faith: one that Paul says all the faithful should share. So what exactly did Abraham believe and why does that matter to us? We have seen already that what we believe is important and the apostle Peter tells us why that is when he said:

*“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through **the knowledge of him** who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us **his precious and very great promises**, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your **faith** with virtue, and virtue with **knowledge**, and **knowledge** with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful **in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ**” (2 Peter 1:3-8).*

❖ Precious Promises

This is another of those Scriptures which needs to be analysed carefully, because it tells us a lot about saving faith. Do your own analysis if you wish and then compare it with the points listed below. Peter is saying that:

- 1 God has given us everything we need to find eternal life and to become godly.
- 2 We can achieve those things by getting to know God and the Lord Jesus Christ (you may remember that we saw that same truth expressed by the Lord Jesus in John 17:3).
- 3 God has called us – just as He once called Abraham – and has given us *“precious and very great promises”*.
- 4 These promises are the means whereby we *“become partakers of the divine nature”*. The promises themselves are an important part of the process of perfection, because they change our desires and affections towards the things of God and away from our naturally sinful desires.
- 5 It follows that it matters very much what we believe. Only the promises of God can have that transforming effect; man-made promises will not suffice.
- 6 Belief in those divine promises constitutes saving faith and such knowledge-based faith is to be the beginning of a life of virtue, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection and love. What we know about God and the Lord Jesus will affect the way we live and those qualities will increase in us the more we know and the closer we get to them both.
- 7 We are not, however, saved by the things we *do* but by the things that we *believe* – for we are saved or ‘justified’ by *faith*.

It is exactly the same for us as it was for Abraham. *“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”*, and if we believe God we too can be counted as ‘righteous’. We have seen already that what we believe is as important as how we believe it; now let’s examine what precisely Abraham believed.

❖ Seven Great Promises



Abraham was given seven sets of promises by God which are the very basis of the New Testament gospel, for the gospel was preached to Abraham as well as to us (Galatians 3:8). These promises are listed below together with their references so that you can look them up and read them in full.

Genesis	No:	Promise	New Testament Reference
12:1-3	1	I will show you a land and make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.	Galatians 3:8
12:7	2	To your offspring I will give this land of Canaan.	
13:14-17	3	All the land that you see around you I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring very numerous, like the dust of the earth.	
15:5,6	4	I will make your offspring numerous like the stars of heaven. Abraham "believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness."	Romans 4:18 Galatians 3:6 James 2:23
15:13-16	5	Your offspring shall be strangers in someone else's land for 400 years, but they will eventually be given freedom with great possessions, and I will judge that nation that made them servants.	Acts 7:6,7
17:1-8	6	I make a covenant with you and you will be the father of many nations; I will establish that covenant with you and with your offspring as an everlasting one and I will give you and your offspring all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession and I will be your God and their God.	Romans 4:17 Acts 7:5
22:15-18	7	By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord ... I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.	Acts 3:25 Hebrews 6:13,14 Hebrews 11:12 Galatians 3:16

Do these promises coincide with your own beliefs about what constitutes the gospel of salvation? If not, you will see the full benefit of going yourself to the Scriptures to see exactly what God really promises, not what you might have thought was on offer. Look up the New Testament references too, if you want to be sure that these promises are regarded as really important.

Now it is time to summarise what these promises mean:

- 1 Abraham was shown **the land of Canaan** before he was told that it **was to be given** (1) to his offspring and then (2) **to him and his offspring**. Yet he never received any of that land, not even enough to put his foot on (as Stephen comments in Acts 7:5).
- 2 He was told that **his offspring would become a great nation**, as numerous as the dust of the earth. This was fulfilled when his descendants were rescued by God from Egypt, having been 400 years in a land which was not theirs. Exodus 12:40 specifically refers to this promise (No. 5 in the above table) when describing the birth of the new nation of Israel. Its people were the descendants of Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob.
- 3 Abraham was also told that his offspring would be like the stars of heaven; that God would make an everlasting covenant with them and be their God, and that they would be the ones who would inherit the land where Abraham lived. He would thus be the "*father of many nations*", an expression which Paul interprets, in Romans chapter 4, to mean that **Abraham would be the "father of all who believe"** – believers throughout the ages.
- 4 **Abraham would have one special descendant** who would take control of everything, including ruling over his enemies. This descendant would bring a blessing for all generations – the greatest of all blessings being **the forgiveness of sins and the way of salvation**: of becoming 'right with God'.

❖ Abraham's Special Offspring

Although Abraham's descendants would include both those who were naturally descended from him as well as those who imitated his faithful example – the “*dust of the earth*” and the “*stars of heaven*” appearing to describe both fleshly and spiritual descendants – one of his offspring would be special. It is significant that the last and greatest of the seven sets of promises speaks of the offspring in the singular, for Abraham was promised that “*your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed*” (Genesis 22:18).

The English word “*offspring*”, or “*seed*” as it is translated in other versions, can refer to many descendants or just to one descendant, and that translation faithfully reflects the meaning of the underlying Hebrew word. It becomes a matter of interpretation when looking at the earlier promises to know whether the promise is about one or many descendants. Fortunately we are not left simply to our own deductions in this matter, but are guided by the New Testament writers – another example of how Scripture interprets Scripture.

❖ Only One Hope

Here are explanations of two key parts of Genesis 22. If you read that chapter you will find that God tested Abraham by asking him to offer Isaac – his long-awaited son – as a sacrifice. Abraham had been willing to do this, believing that God would then have raised him from the dead (as Hebrews 11:17-19 explains). This supreme act of faithful obedience brought Abraham the seventh and greatest set of promises, accompanied by an oath – “*By myself have I sworn*” – the promise and the oath making the outcome doubly certain. This is how the writer to the Hebrews explains the significance of it:

*“For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, ‘Surely I will bless you and multiply you.’ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to **the heirs of the promise** the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us” (Hebrews 6:13-18).*

The promises of God were seen as something very precious which had to be passed on from generation to generation. For between them they comprised “*the hope*”. There are not many different hopes – there is only the “*one hope that belongs to your call*” (Ephesians 4:4). The true hope of the gospel is centred in the Lord Jesus Christ, who declared himself “*the way, and the truth, and the life*” (John 14:6). There are not many truths, just the one; not many ways, just the one way that leads to life for all who find it and walk in that direction.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians in very strong terms telling them how wrong they were to follow a different gospel from the one he had taught. He went on to explain in detail about the things they should believe if they wanted the faith that saves. He explained that before God gave Israel the law through Moses, He had already given promises to Abraham and the fathers. Now, he explained, the law had been fulfilled by the work of the Lord Jesus but the promises remained to be fulfilled. Believing those promises was now the way to obtain God's favour. In Paul's own words:

*“Know then that it is those **of faith** who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles **by faith**, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ [Genesis 12:3] So then, those who are **of faith** are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (Galatians 3:7-9).*

The apostle then turns his attention to the full meaning of the seventh promise, the one which was confirmed with an oath, sworn by the very existence of God, and this is what he says:

*“Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his **offspring**. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to **one**, ‘And to your **offspring**,’ who is **Christ**” (Galatians 3:16).*

This inspired explanation confirms what we have anticipated when looking at Genesis chapter 22 – that Abraham was promised one special descendant who would fulfil the promises. It is clear from something the Lord Jesus once said that Abraham understood that himself. This faithful man knew that one day, a descendant would be born in his family line who would be able to “*possess the gate of his enemies*”, and in whom “*all the nations of the earth*” would be blessed. The setting of that promise gives the clue to his understanding for it is full of significance.

❖ The Only Son

As Paul says in Romans chapter 4, Abraham waited a long time for the birth of Isaac, the son he and Sarah had been promised. When at last he was born they were both well past the age when a natural birth could have occurred. It was a miracle: the result of their long-standing faith. Abraham had

never given up hope, although he was approaching 100 years old and Sarah had been childless all her life. His faith was truly remarkable.

“He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was ‘counted to him as righteousness’” (Romans 4:19-22).

Then, one day, God asked Abraham to go to Mount Moriah (where Jerusalem would later be built) and offer his son – his only son – as a sacrifice. It was a remarkable and wonderful foreshadowing of what God Himself would do. Years later He gave His only Son to be sacrificed in the same vicinity and the chapter is full of allusions to this future sacrifice. Abraham and Isaac were spared the actual sacrifice. Instead the angel who restrained Abraham explained that one day God would make the necessary provision – a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

“Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, ‘The LORD will provide’; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided’” (Genesis 22:13,14).

This was another of those forward-looking promises. God’s Son would be the one whom God would provide to make the promises possible and to bring a blessing for mankind. Thus Abraham came to look forward to that day which he needed as much as any of us. That’s what the Lord Jesus meant when he said:

“Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

This does not mean Jesus existed in the time of Abraham, for he did not. It means that Abraham looked forward to the time when God would send His only-begotten Son, born of Mary, in the family line of Abraham. This is one reason why the New Testament begins with the words:

*“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, **the son of Abraham**” (Matthew 1:1).*

❖ David’s Covenant Promises

A thousand years after Abraham some of the promises made to him had been fulfilled. His descendants constituted a nation that now occupied the land in which he had lived. They had been formed into that nation after many years when they had been strangers in Egypt. They had come out of that land with great possessions, being delivered from there by God’s miraculous power. Led out by Moses, they had conquered the land of Canaan under Joshua’s leadership and eventually God had given them kings to rule over them. David was the second such ruler and it was under his direction that Israel occupied the very place that had featured in the Genesis 22 account. God had asked Abraham and Isaac to go there and it was then He had given them that seventh and greatest promise – the one about a descendant who would come and bring a blessing for all nations.

In David’s time the area of Mount Moriah was further developed and became part of the city of Jerusalem, which David had captured from its previous occupants. It then became Israel’s capital city. Jewish links with it thus go back about 1000 years before Christ, some 3000 years in all. In this very place, God later made great promises to David, promises that built upon what Abraham had been told would happen.

It started when David said that he would like to build God a temple – a permanent place of worship instead of the tent that was then in use. David was a warrior and God wanted to establish a temple which would be a House of Peace, so He said that it would not be appropriate for David to build Him such a dwelling. Instead God said that He would do something for David and his descendants. If you want to do a similar exercise with this set of promises, as for those given to Abraham, now is the time to read 2 Samuel chapter 7, write down the important points about what God would do, and then compare your findings with the list below.

Here are the crucial parts of this agreement which God made with David, such a solemn and binding agreement that it is later referred to as a covenant of promise:

*“Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in? ... I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel ... And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. **When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his***

kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him ... And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever ” (2 Samuel 7:5-16).

❖ Working it Out

These few verses contain many different promises. With Abraham the promises were spread out over several years; with King David they came all together, which makes our analysis a little easier. This is what we are being told:

- 1 God had made David the king over His people Israel – notice that this nation is therefore something special, because they are God’s people. We need to look at that in a bit more detail later.
- 2 God had helped David to overcome his enemies and would continue to work with him to establish him as a great king.
- 3 He would also work with his chosen nation, Israel, to keep them secure and at peace; they would have rest from all their enemies.
- 4 David would have a dynasty – “*the house of David*” – which would succeed him; this was later confirmed to mean that there would be a line of kings descended from David who would reign on the throne in Jerusalem (see, for example, 2 Kings 8:19; 19:34).
- 5 After David’s death, God would raise up a descendant of David who would be of his family line – “*who shall come from your body*” – and God would establish his kingdom. This was a promise, similar to that which Abraham received, about one special descendant, as the following details make clear.
- 6 This descendant would build a house for God. The word “house” can mean a temple or a group of people who are related together, or both.
- 7 His kingdom would last forever.
- 8 God would be His Father and he would be God’s Son.
- 9 Should this Son commit iniquity he would be chastened, but God’s steadfast love would not depart from him.
- 10 David’s house and David’s kingdom would be made sure forever before God.

This ten-point plan refers to a dynasty which is unique, for it has to do with the Kingdom of God. David had been chosen to be a king for God, over God’s people not over his own subjects, and David’s throne is later referred to as “*the throne of the LORD*”. He ruled on God’s behalf and only because of God’s approval, and it would be the same for all his successors. God would work with them as He had worked with David to establish them, give them success in terms of peace, safety and security. If they remained faithful to God, they and the nation they governed would prosper. If the king or the nation broke God’s law and lost faith, however, they would be disciplined and chastened.

❖ David’s Special Offspring

There were to be many kings who would reign on David’s throne at Jerusalem – 22 altogether and they reigned for a total of over 400 years. We will examine the Kingdom of God in more detail in the next chapter. For the moment, notice that some kings of the house of David fulfilled parts of this great set of promises. For example, King Solomon, David’s immediate successor, built a temple in Jerusalem; the one David had wanted to build for God. There were many kings who received help from God to ensure that the nation dwelt safely and securely, but all of them committed iniquity in one way or another; even David himself fell into that category. It would take a very special descendant indeed who could avoid that. Yet such a descendant was intended in the purpose of God, one who would be qualified to establish the kingdom forever.

David thought a lot about these promises that God had made to him, both straightaway and over a longer period. His immediate reaction was an appreciation that what God had promised was not going to be easily achieved, for he said:

*“Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord GOD. **You have spoken also of your servant’s house for a great while to come, and this is instruction for mankind, O Lord GOD!**” (2 Samuel 7:18,19).*

He understood that the promises that God had made would take time to accomplish, but that mankind needed to take notice of and be instructed by them. The conviction that the offspring of whom God had spoken could not come without help from God stayed with David all through his life for among his last sayings was this phrase:

“When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light,

like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth. For does not my house stand so with God? **For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure.** For will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?" (2 Samuel 23:3-5).

Unless God caused these things to prosper, David recognised that they could not be accomplished. Mere humanity could not achieve such an outcome; for David's special descendant would be both son of David and Son of God. This is such a great idea that it deserves more detailed consideration when we are thinking about the Kingdom of God. For the moment take note of two things about this dual parentage:

- 1 It is one of the first things the apostle Paul mentioned when writing to the Romans – *"The gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 1:1-4; see also Acts 13:22,23).*
- 2 It is something the Lord Jesus pointed out to his opponents when they challenged him about the claims he made – that the Messiah had to be both David's descendant and God's own Son:

"What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions" (Matthew 22:42-46).



The Lord's point was quite clear although his opponents did not want to face up to it. The Messiah would have dual parentage. He would be descended from David's line – through Mary – but he would also be God's own Son. Because of this he would have a status higher even than David, who was one of Israel's greatest kings.

❖ Summary

We have seen that these promises made to Abraham and David are an essential part of the gospel, which is centred in the Lord Jesus Christ. They foretell the coming of a special descendant who would accomplish many things and bring great blessings to mankind. In particular he would overcome all his enemies and reign as king forever, over God's people and on God's throne.

Abraham fathered a son – Isaac – as God had promised and in due course a nation came into existence; all of its people were descended from Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob. They occupied the land of promise but they did not occupy it forever and no king came from among them who could keep God's law perfectly. A few hundred years after the time of David the kingdom of Israel ceased altogether and it has never been reconstituted. But the faith that saves requires us to understand that the promises of God have not failed; they are merely awaiting their fulfilment when the coming king reigns on David's throne.

Things to Read

-  The promises God made to Abraham are so important they deserve to be read in their original setting (Genesis 12:1-3; 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:5,6; 15:13-16; 17:1-8; 22:15-18).
-  Using the Table on pages 145 and 146, look up the New Testament references that are listed to see for yourself how those promises are interpreted and applied there.

Questions to Answer

- 11.1 In a couple of sentences explain why God chose Israel as His special nation and whether or not it is now important in the purpose of God?
- 11.2 Can you make a list of the things the special offspring or descendant will accomplish? (Genesis 22:15-18 and 2 Samuel 7:12-16)