

ABRAHAM, FATHER OF ALL BELIEVERS

by Richard Wurmbrand

PART I - Genesis 12

Terah, Abram's Father

About four thousand years ago, in Ur of the Chaldees, south of Babylon on the western bank of the river Euphrates, there lived a man named Terah.

At that time, memories of God's first revelations to man had become dim, and almost everyone had fallen into idolatry.

But in Terah's family there was an awakening. God appeared to his son Abram and told him to leave his home and country and go to another land that He would give his descendants: "Get out of your country, from your kindred and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you." (Gen. 12:1)

Abram believed God and left Ur with his wife Sarai, his father Terah, and his nephew Lot, along with his possessions and servants, following the Fertile Crescent to the land of Canaan. But as is the case with some believers today, they all stopped halfway along the road of faith. Whether Terah thought the journey would be too tiring, or whether he persuaded Abram that they were far enough away from the land of their nativity, the fact is that they stopped in Haran, and Abram did not leave this place till his father died at the age of 205. (Acts 7:2-4)

Abram then felt free to pursue his journey according to the call of God. He himself was seventy-five.

The Bible mentions three of Terah's sons—Nahor, Abram, and Haran, who had died in Ur; he was the father of Lot. Abram, Lot's uncle, no doubt became a father to him, because the two traveled together to Canaan.

Abram Called by God

"I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing." (Gen. 12:2) Obeying the words addressed to him by God, Abram, later to be called Abraham, enters biblical history as the father of the faithful, the friend of God, the progenitor of Israel, the spiritual ancestor of all believers.

As we follow his life from that time onward, he is given as a model of faith in both the Old and New Testaments.

Some imagine that to be faithful means to lose your life. But from the biography of Abram we see that this is not necessarily true. Abram was involved in the things of this earth, because like all of humanity he was put here by God, and he managed to amass great wealth. When the need arose, he knew how to put his hand to the sword to defend an ill-treated relative. But what distinguished him was that he was also ready to renounce the things of this earth that were dear to him as soon as God called him to do so. He knew his priorities—that he was called to shape men’s souls in a spirit of faith.

Abram, this man who bore in his loins Moses, David, and Jesus—may God be eternally praised!—is the true model of a complete man. In all things he sought peace and justice. But if we look at his life, we see a human being who often strayed from the line he drew for himself and, like the best of men, sinned.

A wonderful thought: it could very well be that Noah himself, God’s chosen one, contributed to the formation of Abram’s faith. From Genesis 10, which contains the table of nations, we discover that Noah died when Abram was 58. Perhaps Abram learned to know God from this incredible man of faith, who for so long walked within the hearing of his Maker and Preserver!

The Bible, book of God’s mysteries, confirms this fact to us in another form that is indescribably beautiful. It is known that in the Hebrew language there are no digits. Numbers are written as letters. For example, 1 is written as A, 2 as B, 3 as C, 4 as D, and so on. In this language, Noah’s name contains two letters, one with the value of 50 and the other of 8, for a total of 58. This is significant for God’s people, for it means this: Noah died, but Abram—another Noah—was born. A great man of God died, that another even greater might be born. A brave man of God passed away, but in that moment the world did not remain without a witness, because another, still more full of ardor, was born.

Noah died when Abram became a Noah, that is to say, a preacher of righteousness and faith, like the antediluvian patriarchs before him.

What does this mean to us? Simply this: that God never lets Himself be deprived of His witnesses here on earth. No prophet of God needs to fear that after his death there will be no one to continue the work here on earth. When Noah died, Abram remained; when Gideon died, another 300 remained; when Elijah was translated, another 7,000 remained. When the 12 apostles died, millions of witnesses remained in their wake. God Himself takes care of this.

Legends About Abram

Some of the ancient legends suggest how Abram arrived at a clearer and deeper faith than his father's.

Before Abram knew God, the story goes, his mind wandered throughout creation, and he said, "How much more will we devote ourselves to the work of our hands when honor and adoration is accorded to no one but to the earth, for it bears fruit and supports our life!" But when Abram saw that the earth needs moisture and that it does not bear fruit if the heavens withhold the rain, he said, "No, only to the heavens is devotion due." Then he looked at the sun, saw how it gave light to the world, making plants grow, and said, "Truly, to the sun is devotion due." But the sun cannot be God. Abram then began to think again. Observing the moon and stars, lights of the night sky, he said, "Surely devotion is due to these." But the moon arose and the stars disappeared. So Abram understood, "These are not gods either." He was sad and thought, "If all of these did not have a governor over them, how could one set and another rise?"

It is said that a traveler once saw a great mansion. Desiring to enter, he looked for the door but could not find it. He cried out with a loud voice, but no one replied. Then, lifting up his eyes, he saw that on the roof were spread some pink clothes. After a time he observed that white clothes had replaced the pink ones. He thought, "There must be someone in this mansion, for otherwise some things could not be taken away and others put in their place." When the owner saw the perplexity of the traveler, he showed himself to him and said, "See, I am the owner of the house."

The same thing happened to Abram. He saw the heavenly bodies rising and setting and said to himself, "If they had no governor over them, they would not have this regulated movement. I cannot revere them, but I must revere the one who possesses them." And Abram's mind began to seek the truth.

When God saw how Abram was troubled, He looked at him and said, "You love justice and hate evil. You are alive so that you might rise above all peoples who have been before you."

Here is the second legend:

It is said that Terah, Abram's father, made idols, in spite of the fact that he had a certain knowledge of God.

On one occasion when Abram was on his way to the market to sell idols, a man asked him, "Do you have a god for sale?"

Abram replied with a question: "How old are you?"

"Seventy," said the man.

Then Abram said to him, “Must the god you want to buy adore you, or will you bow down to it?”

The man replied, “It is only right that I bow down to it.”

Then Abram explained to him, “Well, you surpass the god in years, for you were created seventy years ago, while the god you want to buy was made today by my father.” Whereupon Abram returned home with the gods still unsold.

Soon after this, Abram made a momentous decision: “God is alive! Idols will not remain in my father’s house. In three days I will smash them all.” He ran outside to the courtyard where his father reclined and asked, “Tell me, father, which god is it who created the heavens, the earth, and all the people?”

Terah replied, “The gods we have in the house are the ones who created all things.” Then he went into the house with Abram, bowed down to his gods, and prayed to them.

Then Abram addressed himself to his mother and said, “My father has just shown me the gods who created the heavens, the earth, and all the people. Now hurry, take a kid from the flock, kill it, and roast it so that it smells good. I want to take a gift of food to the gods so that they might eat and be content.”

His mother did as he requested and gave the meal to Abram, who then took it to his father’s idols. Meanwhile, Terah knew nothing at all of these goings-on.

Abram stood before the gods all day, but they did not speak or move or stretch their hands toward the food. So Abram played a game with them, saying to himself, “It seems that they do not like the meal I have prepared for them, or else it is too little, and for this reason they do not eat of it. Tomorrow I will prepare another bigger meal.”

And indeed, the next day he asked his mother to prepare another meal. This time she took three tender kids from the flock, made a good meal from them as Abram wished, and gave it to him. Terah knew nothing about this either.

Taking the sumptuous meal into the idols’ room, he offered it to each of them and stood with them all day to see if they would eat. But no sound came from their throats, and they did not stretch out their hands toward the food. Finally, as evening approached, the Spirit of the Lord came over Abram, and he said, “Alas for my father and the mindless people who believe in vanities! They serve these gods of wood and stone, which cannot smell, hear, or speak. They have eyes but do not see, they have mouths but do not speak, they have hands but do not seize, they have feet but do not walk.” And Abram took an ax and smashed his father’s idols, all except the biggest one, into whose hand he put the ax.

Abram started to leave, but just then Terah, who had heard the noise, came into the room to see what had happened and found the gods smashed and lying on the ground. Only one remained intact, and this one held an ax in its hand. In front of it was the meal Abram had prepared. Seeing this, Terah was furious and demanded of his son, “What have you done to the gods?”

Abram replied, “It is not as you think, father. When I gave food to the gods, they all stretched out their hands for it, so that the biggest one alone did not manage to have any. Then he became furious, rose up, took the ax which was in the house, and smashed them all in pieces. Don’t you see that he has an ax in his hand?”

Angrily, Terah replied, “What are you saying? That is all lies. Do the gods have life or spirit in them? Do you think they have the power to do the things you told me? They are just wood and stone. It is I who made them. You are lying when you say that the biggest god destroyed the others. It is you who put the ax in its hand!”

Then Abram replied to his father, “So you serve these gods who have no power to do anything? Will they ever hear your prayers when you call them? Will they free you from the hands of your enemies? Will they conduct your wars? It is madness to bow down to wood and stone, forgetting the God who created all things and the earth and all of us. Father, abandon your idols and serve the true God!”

And jumping up, Abram snatched the ax from the hand of the big idol, broke it in pieces, and ran out of the room.

The Journey from Haran to Canaan

Full of faith that there existed one God only, who made all things, and that all gods and idols are worthless, Abram occupied himself with the marvelous task of shaping souls and preparing them to accept the one true God. These souls might have numbered several thousand.

Such a group of believers could not but provoke the enmity of the idolaters. One legend says that because of his faith Abram was cast into a burning oven, from which he escaped by a divine miracle.

As the resistance intensified, the community of believers led by Abram saw no way out but to leave the land, as did the Huguenots in more modern times.

For Abram and his people, this exodus was a great sacrifice. Archaeological discoveries have attested that Ur and Haran were old cities with a fine culture and civilization. Now, no one who has lived in the city finds it easy to live in tents and watch over grazing sheep, but for

Abram faith was a reality of life. He understood that a relationship with God depended on obeying His voice and that the sacrifice He demanded was in his own best interest.

In its most tender youth, the Christian faith passed through similar trials. Originally born on Hebrew terrain, it soon left and managed to imprint itself on other nations both near and far, unlike Islam which, born in Arabia, remained an Arab religion. Christianity, disowned by those for whom it was originally intended, survived nevertheless, eventually encircling the globe.

The believer of today must pass through a similar trial. He too is commanded to leave all things if he desires to enter the promised heavenly land. In doing so, he follows the example of Abram, whom the Arabs rightly call “the pillar of light” and “the beloved of God.”

The Multiplied Promises

Commanding him to leave Haran, God also gave Abram assurances known as the multiple promises because they are often repeated in the Bible: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing.” (Gen. 12:2)

When God made this prediction, Abram was old, his wife infertile, and they had no children. God had to intervene with a miracle. As a result, his name has endured for thousands of years. We learn from him that if we are to be blessed by God, we must become in turn a blessing to others.

“I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse those who curse you; and in you shall all families of the earth be blessed.” (Gen. 12:3) What an easy thing it is to achieve God’s blessing! For this, you do not need to have Abram’s faith. It is enough to bless him. Jesus makes a similar observation: You do not need to be a prophet or a righteous person, He says, to have a corresponding reward in heaven. In the Gospel it is written, “He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward.” (Matt. 10:41) So let us forever bless Abraham and his seed, which is Jesus! Thus blessing him we too will be blessed.

We should pause to observe that the promise made by God to Abram, which is transmitted also to his descendants—“I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you”—contradicts the interpretation that Jesus, when He cursed the barren fig tree, was actually cursing the people that is the seed of Abraham’s body. God included in His blessing and cursing those who were descended from Abraham. If Jesus had cursed these people, he would Himself be cursed. What blasphemy even to think of such a thing! In the metaphor of the fig tree a particular people is not being cursed—such a thing was foreign to Jesus’ mentality—but human unfruitfulness and hypocrisy in general.

“And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So the assurance concludes and so it was fulfilled. The name of Abraham has since been honored and used in forms of blessing by Christians, Muslims, and Jews. The popularity enjoyed by the name of Abraham, who heard the assurance from God’s mouth, is ample proof that God fulfills His promises abundantly.

Abram’s Companions

Abram was 75 years of age when he left Haran. At that point he made a definitive break with the world of idolatry. Virtually everyone else in the world at the time would form one idolatrous camp, while Abram and his family and entourage were in another opposing camp.

“And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son.” (Gen. 12:5)

Abram accepted God’s command to leave his relatives, but he well knew that there is no divine law against love. If a close relative of his, such as his nephew Lot, were nursing some hopes for improvement in his future, Abram would not consider leaving him in darkness with the others, so he took him with him.

In addition, he took with him the souls who had been shaped under his influence in Haran. The Targum, an ancient retelling of the Old Testament in the Chaldean language, agrees with the usual rendition of Genesis 12:5: “And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran.”

The destination of the exodus was not very far. From Haran to the land of Canaan, then a Babylonian province, it is about 300 miles by way of the Fertile Crescent. For Abram who was Babylonian, his exodus could be likened to that of an Englishman, forced to leave his country, journeying to one of the former English colonies.

But though Canaan was not very far, it was separated from the region of Haran by great rivers and a desert, so the road was hard and travel was not easy.

The Stop at Shechem

After moving slowly with family, servants, flocks and herds, the small community finally arrived in the land of Canaan. The first stopping-place, the first city in Canaan mentioned in the Bible, has a sad resonance in the history of Israel. It was Shechem, which Simeon and Levi would later attack in a cowardly way, butchering its inhabitants. Here Joshua would make his last, incredibly pessimistic speech. Gideon’s son Abimelech, the king of this city, would also be the one who destroyed it. And later, it was here that Judah was separated from the other ten tribes of Israel. Jeroboam, an idolater, would choose this place as his residence. Subsequently,

Shechem became the capital of the Samaritans, who tried to prevent the building of the second temple after the Babylonian captivity.

We must see in the pause at Shechem a symbolic event. It was here, for instance, that Jacob, returning to the land of Canaan after his fourteen years of servitude with Laban, first stopped. This is the experience of many believers today. On the way to the promised heavenly Canaan, we must first pass through the swamp of many misfortunes and lawlessness, often of many injustices that we would not have expected to meet among the people of God. These experiences make us sad, but with this flour of sadness the bread of joy is baked. We know that before us lies the Promised Land.

Just as the cross comes first and then the victory, so there is first weakness, then strength, first fretfulness, then peace, first impotence in the battle against evil, then its elimination from life. First we know a formal Christianity, then we know its power. We must all pass through Shechem first before we possess the heavenly Canaan.

It is said that a rich gardener decided to grow the finest apples in the world. Wandering over land and sea looking for the best seed, practicing grafting and artificial selection, he finally managed, at the end of his life, to produce a strain of apples unsurpassed in taste and beauty. Full of joy, he went to call on a friend.

“Make time to visit me,” he exclaimed, “and eat apples such as you have never come across in your life!” His friend promised but did not come.

The invitation was repeated a second and a third time. Each time the man said, “Yes, yes, I will come,” but he never followed through on his promise. This intrigued the gardener. Why wouldn’t a man come to taste wonderful apples when you invite him?

One day he asked for an honest answer: “Please tell me truthfully why you have not responded to all my invitations.”

Then his friend replied, “I will explain. Once I passed your garden. The wind had tossed some apples and scattered them on the road near the fence. Knowing that you had cultivated the best apples, I bent down and picked up one, thinking it would be a joy. But what a disappointment when I bit into it! I have never in my life had anything so unpleasant in my mouth. It could have been vinegar! Then I realized that you were playing a game with people with all your boasting and that you were not cultivating the best but rather the worst apples in the world!”

The gardener laughed heartily. “So you too have fallen into the trap!” Then he explained: “With such a select breed of apples in the middle of the garden, a serious problem arose, namely,

how to protect my possession from thieves and the host of children who would steal from my orchard. So I got the idea to plant around the garden three meters of trees with inedible fruit. Anyone who jumped over the fence and tasted them would be disgusted, and I would be able to eat good apples in peace with my guests.”

In the same way, God has surrounded His garden with a row of bitter apples. To go into the land of Canaan you must first pass through Shechem. See first the insult that you must bear for Christ. See first Christians’ defects and the disunities between them. Let many weaknesses and many falls come first. “That which is natural comes first.” But those who are not guests called by God are quickly disgusted and leave the garden. Then, with a sigh, God invites in His select ones and shares with them the joys He has provided.

The First Altar

“Then the Lord appeared to Abram. . . , and there [at Shechem] he built an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.” (Gen. 12:7)

The building of an altar was a symbol of taking possession of what had been promised. In the spiritual realm, this was like setting up a banner on the discovery of a new country or the conquest of an area. The altar represented Israel’s right to Canaan by virtue of the fact that Israel’s forefather determined to devote this land to God’s teachings. When the Jews forgot this promise and abandoned the mission committed to them by Abraham, they lost their right over the land.

From Shechem, Abram went to the mountains, to the edge of the city of Luz, which in the Bible is called Bethel.

“And it came to pass, when he was close to entering Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, “Indeed I know that you are a woman of beautiful countenance.” (Gen. 12:11) How wonderful is the man whose eyes are open to the beauty of his own wife and who grants her the pleasure of hearing him say so. Usually, it is other men’s wives that men find more beautiful.

Sarai, ten years younger than Abram, was then at least 65. But since the patriarchs lived much longer than people today (Sarah died at the age of 127), a woman of 65 was still in the fullness of beauty, all the more so since Sarai had no children and so had preserved her good looks.

After this compliment Abram continued, “Therefore it will happen, when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, ‘This is his wife’; and they will kill me, but they will let you live.” (Gen. 12:12)

In the old world, Egyptian women were not known for their beauty. Therefore Sarai might very well attract Egyptian men. Abram reasoned that if they regarded her as unmarried, they would ask him, as her brother, to give her to someone as a wife. On the other hand, the knowledge that she belonged to another would induce them to kill him.

With such thoughts, Abram committed a great sin, common among men today, the sin of mistrust, of unfounded suspicion. With no justification he considered the Egyptians to be without any fear of God. Contrary to his expectations, the Egyptians received him in their country with affection, as the inhabitants of Gerar would do later.

Even so, Abram was tortured by doubt and suspicion, and so he urged Sarai, “Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you.” (Gen. 12:13)

Sarai was in fact Abram’s half-sister on other father’s side. But even so, what Abram said was a lie, for lies are always half-truths that men resort to, with pangs of conscience, to appease their own minds and endangered interests. The words that are said may be absolutely correct, as with Abram, but they can still be lies because a lie consists not of the words uttered but the ideas transmitted. If you convey a false idea with true words, you are responsible for the false impressions they create.

That was the case with Abram, who made a true claim. Sarai was his sister. But with only this information no one would suspect that she was also his wife. The Egyptians thought Sarai was free, and if they thought wrong, it was the fault of Abram who misled them. However true his words might have been, taken at face value, his lie has been recognized down through the centuries. God still says to the Jewish people, referring to their ancestor, “Your first father sinned.” (Isa. 43:27) The treachery succeeds for a while but is soon discovered and, worse, remembered.

The Egyptians, believing that Sarai was only Abram’s sister, led her into the house of Pharaoh, who loaded Abram with precious gifts, thinking he was only the brother of his new concubine. “He treated Abram well for her sake. He had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys, and camels.” (Gen. 12:16)

But the Lord in His mercy struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Abram’s wife Sarai. Then Pharaoh called Abram and said to him, “What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?” (Gen. 12:18)

What a sad situation for Abram, who had to face Pharaoh’s justified rebukes! Later, Jonah, God’s runaway prophet, would hear similar reproaches from pagan sailors.

How sad Sarai would be too. She did not lie to Pharaoh. But quiet and submissive, she fulfilled the wish of her lord and husband. Now she saw him thus shamed. Pharaoh said to Abram, “Here is your wife; take her and go your way.” (Gen. 12:19) Caught in his deception, Abram, patriarch and friend of God though he might be, had nothing to say in reply.

Later, in exactly the same situation, Abimelech, king of Gerar, asked, “What did you have in view, that you have done this thing?”

“What did you see?” is the question God puts today to all who are suspicious and mistrustful. “What made you form such a bad image about other people?”

Men grow angry because of fears inspired by figments of their own imagination. Out of unreasonable fear they resort to sin, thinking it will help them escape from dangers that do not exist.

We encounter this fear in many biblical characters. Eliezer, Abraham’s trusted slave, fretted over what to do if Laban’s daughter, whom he was sent to woo for Abraham’s son Isaac, would not come with him. Why was this fretting necessary? Rebecca followed him at once. Jacob worried about how to escape from the bad reception he expected from Esau when he returned from Canaan. But Esau fell on his neck, wept, and declared himself a true brother.

Returning Sarai to Abram, Abimelech said, “See, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you.” (Gen. 20:15)

How much wiser was Abimelech than Pharaoh! The Egyptian ruler, seeing that Abram had sinned, drove him out of his land. But the king of Gerar, who would see the same sin in Abram, realized that this man, though sinful like everyone else, had a deep knowledge of God and was a friend of the Creator. Out of consideration for the blessings and knowledge he could obtain through Abram, Abimelech let the sins pass. What a lesson his attitude is for us!

This is a sign of knowing how to eat the heart of a pomegranate and throw away the skin.

PART II - Genesis 13

The Burden of Riches

Pharaoh did not have this insight. Abram had to leave Egypt.

“Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold.” (Gen. 13:2) He had been rich even before his descent into Egypt. Jesus said that it is extremely difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom, but it is not completely impossible if God gives His grace. Abram was able to enter not only the earthly Canaan but also the heavenly.

However, the phrase from the Bible is good: “Abram was very burdened with wealth.” This expression has its origin in the life of nomads who progress on their journey with more

difficulty if they have long convoys of servants and cattle with them. But the expression is also useful for spiritual life. Riches weigh down the faithful. And weighed down thus, they progress with difficulty.

The Split with Lot

“Lot also, who went with Abram, had flocks and herds and tents.” (Gen. 13:5) Though Lot traveled with Abram and had great material possessions, he had not yet gained the knowledge of God and the faith that his uncle had.

It is easy to understand how this was so. Lot walked with Abram, and Abram walked with God. Lot was content with less, just to walk with a man of God. This was why the evil happened.

We should not be content with less than a personal walk with God. Walking with men of God is not enough. We must be among those who walk with God Himself.

The land where they dwelt was not big enough for the two of them to live together because their possessions were so great. There was not sufficient pasture for all their cattle. As a result, “there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock.” (Gen. 13:7) This quarrel was particularly dangerous because the Perizzites and the Canaanites lived in the country at that time and were observant of Abram’s strong faith. Their view of his God could be compromised as a result of this dispute. Then the Canaanites could use this as an excuse to eliminate both groups.

Seeing that Lot, probably bored by his many sermons and admonitions, was upset about the conflict between the cowherds, Abram said to him, “Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, I will go to the left.” (Gen. 13:8, 9)

The land was promised to Abram. As Lot’s uncle, he was the elder of the two. And yet he did not insist on his right but in a magnanimous gesture offered Lot whatever part of the land he might choose. Separating peacefully, even at the risk of loss, is better than living together and quarreling. Abram’s attitude toward Lot is the best solution to conflicts between brothers.

Lot Chooses the Land of Jordan

Obligated to choose a section of the land, Lot looked around. He can be faulted for allowing himself to be guided by his eyes, which can so easily deceive. Lot saw that the land of Jordan was verdant and well watered. But events would prove that he should not have looked at this, for what good would the richness of the soil of Jordan do when he had to flee empty-

handed? The good land was of no use if the people were wicked beyond measure. Later the Lord was forced to exclaim, “The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and. . .their sin is very grievous.” (Gen. 18:20) With the Sodomites sin was a way of life, rampant and very public. They had no shame.

One should not choose only those things that are beautiful to the eye but those that are good and useful to the soul. If Lot had understood this he would have stayed with Abram, seeking another way to avert the quarreling between their cowherds. Later, Lot would greatly regret the choice he had made. The apostle Peter tells us in his second letter that Lot, now righteous, remembered in Sodom what Abram had said and was grieved and oppressed there by the debauched life of the inhabitants. As he lived among them, his righteous soul was afflicted every day because of their evil deeds, which he both saw and heard.

But who forced him to choose this particular region? Let us not be deluded by the beauty of sin!

It is true that Sodom and Gomorrah, cities in the plains of Jordan, were described as the garden of the Lord. Sin can also be beautiful and enticing, but it leaves you with a bitter taste.

“But the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the Lord.” (Gen. 13:13) They would be of no benefit to Lot and his family. On the other hand, God said to Abram, “I will bless those who bless you.” This was what Lot did not realize.

The Sodomites agreed to every level of evil, regardless of the fear of punishment. What robber ever decides to forego a robbery out of fear of the lawman? But in the face of God, the sinfulness of Sodom and Gomorrah knew no limits. They had no shame at all.

Yet Lot, thinking only of material things, left Abram and settled among such men.

God’s Promise Is Repeated

After Lot left, God renewed His promise to Abram: “For all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever.” (Gen. 13:15) The promise must have seemed very curious at that point, just after he had been left by his nephew, who was the only possible heir of the childless man.

But the nephew would not inherit the promise, however much he might change as a result of the education he received from Abram in his youth. The land would belong to Abram’s seed, that is, to those who were directly descended from him.

Likewise, you cannot make yourself an Israelite through any humanly devised influence or development. Nor can you become a member of God’s people, the new Israel, the church of Jesus Christ, through an act of volition or through a change of character under the influence of

certain people. Rather, you must be born again, born of water and the Spirit; you must have the Seed of the Lord in you.

Lot would have been only an imitation heir. A Christian who is not born again from above also remains an imitation. For the heavenly kingdom is promised only to Abraham's seed, that is, not to those who are well brought up but to those who are well-born from Christ, who is Himself the Seed of Abram.

PART III - Genesis 14

The First Biblical War

After Abram was given the first promise in Canaan, he faced a famine. After the promise was repeated, he was dragged into a war—the first in biblical history.

How difficult it is for people to get along together! They quarrel over the most trivial things.

In the narrow land of Jordan there were four kingdoms. Against these kings came many armies to wage war. The first was the army of Amraphel, known in history by the name Hammurabi. (It is worth noting that this king's real name is the one given in the Bible. The latter name was only an attempt by the Babylonians to pronounce and write the foreign name of a king who was not of Babylonian but West Semitic origin.) Amraphel was king of Shinar, a name given to Babylon.

Then followed the army of Arioch, king of Ellasar, and Tidal, king of Goyim, or nations. There also came the army of Elam, under the leadership of their sovereign Chedorlaomer, a name meaning servant of Laomer, a pagan god, indeed the principal god of Elam. According to mythology, he was the son of Ea, Babylonian goddess of water.

We should realize that all these armies were hardly insignificant, for the populations who fought in their camps had very advanced cultures. They had produced important works in the fields of arithmetic and medicine. Their foreign commerce extended as far as India. So they were civilized by our standards and progressive enough to do great evil.

The war was waged against an army that was decidedly inferior, belonging to minor kings who were only sheiks or tribal chiefs. These were Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah (this name appeared in a cuneiform inscription in the Ebla tablets), Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, or Zoar.

“All these joined together in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea).” (Gen. 14:1-3)

The asphalt of Siddim was discovered by the Babylonian kings; bitumen was one of the necessities of life in Babylon and appears to have been a state monopoly. It was used instead of

lime and was also used for heat and light. The Canaanite kings were subjugated by Chedorlaomer, but after thirteen years they revolted. Babylon, cut off from the bitumen resources near the Dead Sea, went to war.

Predictably, the Canaanite kings were beaten and were careful to give tribute in fugitives, leaving their people to fate. As they retreated, some got bogged down in the asphalt pits that covered the Siddim valley, while their compatriots took refuge in the mountains.

Abram Comes to Lot's Assistance

The victors took all the riches and food of Sodom and Gomorrah and left. They also took Lot, Abram's nephew, who by that time lived in Sodom, together with his belongings. So Lot lost his wealth which he treasured so much and for the love of which he parted with Abram. He himself was a prisoner of war, the first in biblical history. One person escaped and brought the news to Abram "the Hebrew."

Abraham is the first man who bears the ineradicable title of "Hebrew" in the Holy Scriptures. Elam, Shinar, Sodom, Gomorrah, and Zeboiim are old names long forgotten. But Hebrews—Jews—exist to this day.

"Now when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his three hundred and eighteen trained servants who were born in his own house, and went in pursuit as far as Dan." (Gen. 14:14) It is a little difficult to believe that Abram, a prudent man, went out against such powerful kings with only 318 men. Certainly this was the number of those born in his house, trained fighters whom he may very well have placed in front of other armed allies. At any rate, with this army Abram defeated Chedorlaomer and freed Lot, among others.

Melchizedek

After Abram returned from defeating Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley), very near Jerusalem, which was by then one of the strongest fortresses in Canaan.

"Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High." (Gen. 14:18) Today we would compare this with the rite of holy communion instituted by Jesus, when He said over the bread, "Take, eat; this is My body," and over the wine, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." (Matt. 26:26-28)

Who was this Melchizedek, whom church teachers consider a representation of the Lord Jesus? In the Bible we are told he was the king of Salem. Egyptian documents show that

Jerusalem was often simply called Salem, a poetic name used in Psalm 76:2. But he was not only king of Jerusalem: he was, Scripture insists, priest of the Most High God.

The apostle John quotes a strange verse from the Psalms (82:6): “If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken). . .” (John 10:35) Paul also makes a similar reference: “For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are gods many and lords many). . .” (I Cor. 8:5) In the Old Testament, Moses is named as God to Pharaoh, through Aaron. (Ex. 7:1) Even angels are indirectly referred to as gods. (Ps. 8:5)

As for the gods of this age, are we not told that some believe their stomach is their god? (Phil. 3:19)

So there are many gods. But Melchizedek, king of Salem, was considered a man of high rank: priest of the Most High God. Later in the Bible we find Jethro, priest of Midian, who was different from Melchizedek, but who also knew God.

Melchizedek Blesses Abram

The name of Melchizedek appears again in Scripture, first in Psalm 110 and then in Hebrews; these passages enable us to get a better insight into the character of this mysterious priest-king. In the Old Testament reference, which contains hidden secrets that no man could understand if the Holy Spirit had not interpreted them in the New Testament, we read that Jehovah, the Most High God, swore irrevocably about the Messiah, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” (Ps. 110:4)

But what sort of priest was Melchizedek? We want to find this out so we can know what sort of Great Priest Jesus the Messiah would be.

When Abram returned from the war, Melchizedek brought bread and wine. The priest of the Most High God (*El Elyon*, in the original), served the contender for the faith when he was tired. Jesus the Savior is a similar priest; He too strengthens fighters for the faith when they are tired.

The only priestly duty the Bible records about Melchizedek is that he served to bless. And what does Jesus do but bless, and bless forever!

In the first chapters of Revelation, the Lord characterizes the different churches of Asia, praising some and saying that others are simply dead or dying. But these stern epistles are preceded by the following comforting words: “John, to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne.” (Rev. 1:4) Grace and peace to the strong in faith, grace and

peace to Laodicea, grace and peace to all! Blessing and again blessing to all! Jesus came to bring these things—Jesus, the priest after the order of Melchizedek.

How strengthening it must have been to Abram to meet with a priest who was an example of the Savior in the way he carried out his duty! The New Testament writer says, “For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him. . .” (Heb. 7:1)

Now however much you may have fought for a right cause, the moment when you return from slaughter seems the least appropriate time for you to be blessed. But that is also the way with Jesus, the One who receives sinners, who gives the best garment and the fattest calf to a son who has spent his money in debauchery. How much more does He praise the one who is forced by hostile circumstances to fight a war he neither desires nor approves, but in which he has no choice.

The King Without a People

Melchizedek is further described as “without father, without mother, without genealogy.” (Heb. 7:3)

A document recently discovered by chance by some diggers explains this little verse to us. About four or five hundred years after the time of Melchizedek, Abdi-Teba, governor of Urusalim, writing to his boss, the king of Egypt, says, “See, this land of Urusalim was not given to me by my father, nor by my mother: the hand of the king gave it to me.” This means that Abdi-Teba did not inherit this post by birth but received it as a gift from the king of Egypt.

Likewise, Jesus did not owe His high position to the fact that He was born of the Holy Spirit and was the Son of God in eternity. At birth, He was put on an equal footing with us. He was made a servant like us and was tried in everything like us. He possesses the kingdom of heaven not because of a special birth, but because of a special life on earth. Here He was perfect. All salvation comes as a result of listening to Him, as Paul’s epistles tell us at length.

Not once did Jesus or the apostles attempt to persuade people to follow Him on the grounds that He was born supernaturally from a virgin and the Holy Spirit. He did not want to persuade people by His birth but through His sublime teaching and example and the signs He gave.

The last point worth remembering is that Jesus, unlike Melchizedek before Him, was a priest “who has come, not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an endless life.” (Heb. 7:16) Thus His preaching is given to all religions.

In some religions you could be a priest by birth. For example, in the Hebrew religion all Aaron's descendants were priests, even if they were great scoundrels. Annas and Caiaphas, who condemned Jesus to death and could have been branded criminals, as descendants of Aaron were priests. In other religions, the candidate for priesthood is not tested for his faith and holiness, but for his degree from schools of high learning. He is a priest independent of all interior qualities, through the ceremony of ordination.

Jesus was a priest not by the law of inheritance or ordination, but by His immortal life, by virtue of which any true Christian becomes a priest. What is the difference between a priest by law and a priest by life? Law and life are in opposition. Every creature naturally follows the life that is innate, without any external law or obligation. A bird does not need a law telling it to fly. A bird's life makes flying a delight.

A law is always a sign that life is lacking. The law forbidding theft is proof that those for whom it exists live a warped life, because honest men have no need of such a law. And law is not only a sign that true life is missing, but it is also incapable of producing it. It can check and restrain sin, but it cannot inspire life. It can demand but not give.

But through Jesus the "power of an endless life" operates in spiritual believers, as they delight in God's will. They do not need a law obliging them to do so, nor one regulating their relations with God. They are priests through Jesus' perfect life.

From all these points of view, the meeting with Melchizedek, a man with the power to bless, who achieved a knowledge of God not through tradition but through his own searching, and who was a priest not through the law of any human institution but through the eternal life that was in him, must be interpreted as a decisive moment in Abram's life.

Abram Gives Tithe

Abram gave Melchizedek "a tithe [a tenth part] of all" the loot of war. He didn't keep any for himself, not even a length of thread or a sandal strap. "Nothing for me" was his motto." Nothing for me," not even in prayer. St. Catherine of Genoa, at an old age, said, "See, O my Lord, about 35 years have passed since I asked You for anything for myself."

As for tithe, it must have been familiar to Abram, since it was practiced on a large scale by Babylonian citizens. Cuneiform inscriptions from Babylon often refer to tithes. The great temples of Babylon were partly funded by *esra*, tithe taken from princes and peasants. In the British Museum there are many tablets that are invoices of tithes for the great temples of the sun god of Sippura during the time of Nebuchadnezzar and his successors. But there are tablets dating from an even earlier era.

The tithe, which was given at that time to the temples of idols, Abram paid to Melchizedek, priest of the Most High God.

PART IV - Genesis 15

God's Covenant Is Renewed

After this meeting, Abram had a vision of God and was frightened, remembering that the last time God spoke to him there followed a war in which, though in a just cause, the blood of many innocent men was shed. He did not know to what degree he must fear the law God gave Noah: "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man." (Gen. 9:6) This law does not specify any exception in the event of war.

But God comforts him: "Abram, do not fear." The law is not for righteous men. It cannot punish fundamentally blameless people, though they too have sins in their life, when circumstances force them to deeds which in themselves are wrong, or when they fall victim to some temptation and then rise up again and claim forgiveness. The law is for unrepentant sinners: for the lawless and the proud, for those without piety, for the unjustified, for killers of men, for debauched people, for sodomites, for sellers of men, for those who make false oaths, for murderers of family, friends or strangers—in short, for those who live by nature in these sins, who wallow in them, without striving for higher things.

Abram replied, "My Lords, Jehovah, what will you give me?" (Gen. 15:2) This is the exact translation of the reply, the Hebrew word *Adonai* being the plural of the word for "Lord." This is very important because it means that Abram must have known Jehovah, the God of heaven and earth, as a plurality, precisely what the New Testament reveals so clearly. He knew that the one God is a Trinity. Many things in the Old Testament show us a certain knowledge of this secret.

"What will You give me?" Abram asks God. Abram is not content with generalities in the covenant, such as, "I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward." (Gen. 15:1) He wants to know concretely what he will obtain. He immediately formulates a request. In fact, he asks God for a sign. He treats every question practically with God; he does not theologize or become sentimental with Him. That is how our relationship with God should be: concrete, direct, practical.

"What will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" Abram feels he is near the end of life, and he has no children. How could God repay him? He has only Eliezer. But the name of this man—so significant in Hebrew, "God helps," a

name he gave to his servant—has become so familiar in Abram’s mouth that it means nothing; it no longer inspires trust in God’s capabilities.

God assures him that his heir will not be Eliezer but “one who will come from your own body.” Then, as part of the vision, He leads him outside and says, “Look now toward heaven.” What wonderful advice! Look to heaven! Abram looked away from his aging body—he was almost 100—and in response to God’s command looked to heaven where miracles come from. Our eyes too should always be directed to heaven.

“Look toward heaven,” God says to him, “and count the stars if you are able to number them.” (Gen. 15:5)

An old tradition mentioned by the historian Josephus Flavius and by the Talmud says that Abram was a great astronomer. In any case, he no doubt was familiar with the stars. The Greek philosophers of ancient times estimated that there were 1028 stars. A good eye can count much more than that, and some can see about 5,000. The task of counting the visible stars is difficult even today. But the faithful knew that there are stars we cannot see. “The heavenly army cannot be counted,” wrote Jeremiah thousands of years before the discovery of the telescope. How can these invisible stars be counted? And how can lenses allow you to establish the number if you do not know what more powerful lenses might reveal in the future?

“So shall your descendants be,” God informs Abram. Your seed will be innumerable, inestimable. A part of your seed will be seen, as a part of the stars are seen. These are the ones who belong to the body of the church. They can be counted, though with difficulty. It is known approximately how many Christians there are in the world, but there are also invisible stars. There are individuals who are part of the spirit of the church, without being part of its visible body. All these are of the seed of Abram. Until the end of time there will be more and more.

Abram’s seed would be like the stars in heaven in another sense: they would be arranged similarly. Stars move only according to a well organized system. In the same way, those who are Abram’s seed do not live and move randomly but stand in their place and move according to God’s loving commands.

It is very interesting to compare this promise with the one God gave to Jacob: “Your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth.” (Gen. 28:14) In this world Abram’s seed is like dust scattered and trodden under every foot. In God’s kingdom, though, they will shine like stars. Yes, they are like dust and like stars. There is no more marvelous way to describe it.

Abram Had Faith in God

There is a curious thing about this vision that might easily be missed. When Abram had the vision there was absolutely no star to be seen in the sky because it was day. The sun would set much later. How then could he understand this promise of God? Not through signs, not through vision, but through a new faculty: faith. Abram, the first historical character in the history of Israel, exercised faith.

After the Bible reports God's promise, there follows a short sentence: "Abram believed in the Lord." He had faith in God. It is a short sentence but is of great significance. To trust God is totally different from merely believing that God exists. It is a great achievement for a human soul, a mortal, to trust the eternal God.

What can we compare this to? Can an afflicted, ill-treated worker trust an intellectual who lives in great comfort and who claims that the difference in living conditions is necessary for the better good of society and therefore the worker himself? The empty stomach and the poor man's rage would revolt at this. It is a great achievement for a worker to accept with love this wrenching inequality, to support it, to believe in the intellectual's affirmations when he cannot control his own afflictions, and then to devote himself to assuring a life of comfort for the intellectual.

What else can trust in God be compared to? Stand before a man who till yesterday was a complete stranger to you, whose intellectual capacity, honesty, morality, virtues, or defects you know nothing about, and hear from his mouth these words: "You must have injections. Take this bitter medicine. Give up the following foods. Submit to an operation that might kill you." Yet you not only believe in the existence of doctors, as men believe in the existence of God, but you trust this doctor.

Put simply, you let him manipulate your body because he offers you the possibility of better health in the future, though you have no evidence but his word. For the simple reason that this man is a doctor, you believe his words, abandon all sense of shame, undress in front of him, and let him do with your body everything he claims you need, even to the point of causing you more pain. That is what it means to trust the doctor.

But to trust God is much more than that. Even a superficial glance at history reveals that up to a certain point the development of human society would have been impossible without divisions into social classes, based on intelligence, education, and so on. So we learn to trust someone from the upper class. If you trust the doctor, you do so because there is sufficient evidence that his treatment works.

But why do you trust God? The world asks, “Has someone come back from the dead and told you about the reward of the afterlife? Why put restrictions on yourself now when no one has validated the existence of a future life in God’s kingdom? Why trust God’s affirmations which we cannot check?”

Between me and someone from a higher social class the difference in the essential things of life is basically small. Between the doctor and me there is only a cultural or educational difference. But between God and me there is an enormous distance. My mind, with much effort, can attain the doctor’s level of education, but never God’s knowledge.

Here is where Abram’s new faculty comes into play with all its power, the faculty that made him the father of all believers: his faith.

He Counted Faith as Righteousness

Abram was a man who not only lived life but also thought about the world around him. Since God’s invisible qualities, His eternal power and mastery, are seen in His created world, he observed them carefully and learned that they all speak of a single invisible Creator. He also knew that this Creator was a plurality of persons. Through this conviction he put himself in conflict with the world of idolatry around him.

When a voice came into his life that said, “Leave your country and follow Me,” Abram might have considered it a hallucination. But he believed it. For him it was the voice of the God he worshiped and whom he now considered worthy of discovery.

The following story illustrates the opportunity to exercise faith. Two groups of painters who struggled to be first in the king’s eyes each praised their own way of creating. So the king decided to set both groups of artists to work painting a large hall. Dividing it in two with a curtain, he assigned each group one part. After the work was finished, the curtain was to be drawn back so the king could decide which had won and which had lost. All took place as he commanded.

The first group, before setting to work, gathered the brightest colors, while the other group concerned itself with smoothing and polishing the walls that were to be embellished. When the first group finished their work, the others declared that they too had finished, though they had painted nothing. The king said to them, “How can you say you have created something if you have not even used color and have not painted anything on the walls?”

They replied, “Draw the curtain and you will see who has done the better work!”

Then the curtain was drawn back and behold! the half where they painted nothing, but only smoothed and polished the walls, shone with bright colors and revealed the same pictures as

the other half. This was because through much care and hard work they polished the walls like mirrors, which then reflected what was before them.

Likewise, the human soul can please God in two ways: by making perfect, beautiful things—and who can do this?— or by polishing the faculty of faith in order to reflect the praise of God and His perfection. Faith, then, can be as wonderful as being perfect. Thus, the faith of a man can be considered righteousness.

But there is another simple faculty in the human soul equal to faith—namely, ardor.

When God’s people, the children of Israel, traveled through the desert, an Israelite brought his brothers a Midianite maiden, though it was this very sin of fornication with the Midianites that Moses had declared punishable by death. Seeing this, Phinehas, son of Eleazar, with the ardor he had for God, pierced both of them with a spear and thus ended the incipient orgy among the children of Israel. The psalmist tells us that this ardor “was accounted to him for righteousness”—exactly the same expression used for Abram’s faith. (Ps. 106:31)

None of us is justified in our life. Not all of us have the opportunity to perform extraordinary deeds proving our great ardor for God. However, if we develop the faculty of faith in our soul, God is able to count us righteous.

Believe God

Let us try to understand better what faith is. What does it mean to believe God?

It means first that when we meet with bitter experiences and suffer disappointments, we should continue to believe that God is a just and loving Father, that it is for our best good that He allows such trials. Yet His paths are not like ours.

There is a legend that illustrates this point. It is said that Moses used to find lonely places where he could meditate by himself. Often the Spirit of God would come to him then. One day he sat down under a tree close to a fountain and gave his thoughts free rein. Presently a man came to drink water and then went away. But unbeknown to him, his purse fell from his belt. After a while another man came to the fountain to drink and saw the purse. He picked it up gladly and went on his way. After him a third traveler stopped near the fountain and remained for a longer time.

Meanwhile, the first man discovered the loss of his purse and reasoned with himself, “Of course, it dropped from my belt when I bent down to drink water.” He turned back quickly and arrived to see a man sitting by the fountain.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I am tired,” replied the third traveler, “and am having a little rest here. I have eaten and drunk and now I’m ready to leave.”

“Not before you return my property. You must have found the purse I lost here. It couldn’t have been someone else’s, since I just lost it.”

The accused answered, “Friend, I have found none of your purses. Please don’t blame me for robbery. Maybe you lost the purse elsewhere, or you did not lose it at all.”

Soon a quarrel arose between them and they started to fight. Moses wanted to separate them, but before he could do so, the man who had lost the purse killed the other and ran away.

Moses felt sorry for the one who had suffered death unjustly and wondered why God would permit such a thing. He said, “God, I was a witness to three unfair deeds. First, you let one man lose his fortune. Second, you let a man to whom it did not belong take and enjoy it. And third, as if this was not enough, you let the loser become a murderer. Please explain to me, therefore, how these things should be understood.”

Then God answered His servant Moses: “You think my judgments are unfair. Thus many things I do seem strange to people, because they do not know that everything has its causes and justification. You should know that the one who lost the purse was indeed an honest man, but his father had obtained that money by robbery. The person robbed was the father of the man who found the purse. That is why I allowed things to happen this way, so that the owner’s son could obtain his rightful heritage.

“You should know too that the man who was strangled did not take that purse, indeed, but a long time ago he had killed the brother of the man who murdered him. That deed had been committed without witnesses, and the blood of the victim remained unavenged. That is why I permitted the killer to be suspected by the victim’s brother and murdered. This is how I let many things happen on earth. No one can search My ways. As a consequence, many times people are unable to understand why things are good for the bad person and bad for the good one.”

The faithful person “believes God.” He believes God has sufficient reason to proceed as He does in all cases. And no matter how bitter or hard circumstances appear, he worships God in his heart.

Here is another legend: A believer fasted for many days and asked his heavenly Father to show him an angel. His wish was fulfilled. An angel came to him and asked, “Do you wish anything from me? I want to fulfill your desire.”

The believer answered, “I would like to travel with you to observe your activities on the earth, so that I may learn what is useful to me and partake of your wisdom.”

The angel replied, “You cannot understand what I do, and furthermore you will insist that I explain the reasons for my actions.” The believer assured him he would not trouble him, and so it was settled that they go everywhere together. The only stipulation was that their venture would end as soon as the believer insisted that the angel answer certain questions.

As they began their journey, they came to the house of a very poor man, who had nothing but a cow. When the man and his wife, who were standing at the gate, saw the two strangers approaching, they went to meet them, greeted them, and invited them to enjoy their hospitality. Then they set before them the best food they had in their poor house. The traveling companions ate and spent the night there. When morning came and the two prepared to leave, the angel said a prayer, with the result that the host’s cow dropped dead. Observing this, the believer was surprised and a bit angry. He said to himself, “Is this the poor man’s reward for honoring us—to have his cow, his only fortune, taken away?”

Turning to the angel, he asked, “Why did you kill the cow of this man who received us with such good will?”

The angel said, “Remember our understanding. You committed yourself to keep quiet and not to raise any objections, unless you do not want to go with me any more. At the end I will tell you everything.” The believer asked no further questions.

They went on for another whole day, and at evening they came to the house of a rich man. He let them stay overnight but gave them nothing to eat and offered no courtesies. The angel observed that the house had a cracked wall, which the master of the house was too busy to fix. When morning came, the angel prayed and the wall was miraculously repaired—to the astonishment of the believer, whose sadness and wonder increased. But he refrained from asking the angel about his action.

So they traveled on. When evening came again they found themselves at church. Its benches were made of gold and silver, and each person sat in his own seat, according to his position and rank. When the parishioners saw the two men coming in, one of them turned to another and asked, “Who would like to feed these two beggars tonight?”

“A little bread and water is good enough for them,” came the reply. No one treated the travelers as they should have been. Yet when they were ready to leave, the angel said to those in the church, “May God help you become great and famous.” These words further provoked the believer’s sadness, but he kept silent.

At the end of the next day the travelers reached a town where the people went out to meet them with great joy. They welcomed them with smiling faces, sheltered them in their best house,

and fed them well. On their departure the angel prayed, "Please, God, let only one person in this town be great and famous."

Now the believer could restrain himself no longer. He said to the angel, "You have to show me your secret."

The angel replied, "If you are ready to part from me, I will explain to you all the reasons for my actions. You should know, first of all, that the poor man's cow was sick. All the people in the house would have died if they had kept drinking its milk. That is why I prayed for the cow to die. The rich man whose wall I repaired by a miracle would have found a great treasure of gold and silver under it if he had torn it down to rebuild it. To stop him I repaired wall. As for all the hard-hearted people from the first church, I wanted them to be great and famous because this is a misfortune that leads to quarrels. Any place where there are great people is finally wasted. However, I desired that the nice people have only one single leader, and my prayer will be useful to them. Their church will grow stronger as they grow in unity."

In the end the angel advised the believer, "I am leaving you now, and I want to teach you things that will be useful. Don't wonder if you see things go well for a bad man! His happiness is his misfortune. On the other hand, if you see a good man who lives in pain and sadness, who endures hard times, who is hungry, thirsty and naked, do not be grieved. Do not doubt the Maker's providence, but praise Him, consider Him right, and trust Him. God's judgment is true, and His eyes are watching people's deeds. Who can tell Him what to do?"

This story gives us an insight into what it means to "believe God."

To believe God means to receive what He says about the vanity of this world and about the fact that we should endeavor to inherit eternal life.

It is said that Alexander the Great, when fighting his wars of conquest, reached a country where the only survivor of the royal family was spending his whole time in a graveyard. When he was called by Alexander to receive the throne of his parents, he refused, saying, "For years I have tried to distinguish the bones of kings from those of beggars in the graveyard, and I cannot do so. What good then are all the honors of this world?"

"Good!" Alexander responded. "But as king at least you have a happy life on this earth."

"I do not believe in happiness here," the young man said, "because here there is no life without death, youth without old age, richness without want, joy without pain, health without sickness, truth without error, and righteousness without sin. I do not need the throne."

Solomon said that all is vanity. We rush after the wind. But God has prepared a kingdom for His subjects. All our thoughts and endeavors should aim at being part of that kingdom.

To believe God means to acknowledge that He is right when He diagnoses our condition. Many times a sick person does not realize the seriousness of his illness. However, he believes the doctor when he is told that his symptoms reveal a very serious disease, and he follows the cure prescribed. Likewise, we should believe God when He says that we are all lost sinners and that the punishment of sin is death.

Then to believe God means to believe His promise that anyone who turns to Him in repentance is received, even if the mind lies and says there is no more forgiveness to be had.

The daughter of a pious woman ran away from home and fell into a life of sin. For ten years her mother heard nothing from her. Then, suddenly, the young woman came to her senses and, seized by remorse, took the train and headed back to her home town.

Arriving late at night, she went to her mother's house and was surprised to see a light in the bedroom window. The girl began to worry, thinking, "Maybe mother is sick, since she never sleeps with the light on." She went to ring the bell, but the gate was wide open. Now her worry increased. "It seems mother is really sick," she said to herself, "and has called the doctor to come at night." But when she started up the stairs, she suddenly heard her mother's voice: "Is that you, Joan?"

"Yes, mother," she answered, holding back the tears. "How come the gate is wide open?"

"It has not been closed for ten years, ever since you left," her mother explained.

"And how come the light is on in your room?"

"For ten years it has never been turned off. I have always waited for you," her mother answered gently.

This is how the sinner is received who returns to God. He finds that the light has always been on and the gate has never been closed. He realizes that it was only his own lifestyle and fear that kept him away.

To believe God means not to try to invent new remedies to be saved, but to believe in the remedy God gives us, just as we believe the doctor rather than the quack when he prescribes medicine for our ills. The only remedy that leads to salvation is faith in Jesus Christ, who sacrificed His life on Golgotha for our sins.

To Make a Covenant by Sacrifice

Further on God said to Abram, "I am the Lord that brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give you this land to inherit." (Gen. 15:7)

So far, God had promised only that He would give him the land. Here for the first time He specifies that He will make him its owner. Then Abram requested from God a sign, as Gideon was to do later, and as the Pharisees and Sadducees did of Jesus.

So the Lord said, “Take a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtle dove and a baby pigeon,” without giving him details as to what to do with these animals.

There have been various theories about the symbolism implied here. For example, rabbinical interpreters everywhere understand that instead of an age of three years the numeral three would refer to quantity, thus: “three calves,” “three goats,” etc. Therefore the figure would not refer to the age of the animal but to their number. The three animals would symbolize the three temples of Jerusalem.

The first temple would be prefigured by calves, because it was preceded by the episode of the golden calf and because, later, Jeroboam built a calf as an object of worship. Goats would represent the second temple because at that time Jews were *azei panim*, “cheeky” to God. It is a pun based on the closeness between the Hebrew words used for “goat” and “cheeky.” Satan is called *Azazel*, a word similar to goat; it was he who mastered the second temple at that time. The third temple is represented by rams, symbolizing strength, because when the third temple is built in Jerusalem, the people of God will be strong. (*Midrash Raba*)

Another simpler explanation is that the command did refer to the age of the animals, showing how many generations would be oppressed in Egypt.

Whatever the symbolism, Abram took all these beasts, split them in two, and put the pieces opposite each other. In such a sacrifice, after the throat was cut and the blood spilled, the animal’s body was usually cut lengthwise and the pieces placed side by side, butterfly-style. The sides that made a covenant met in the middle, and there the oath was taken. In this respect, the Greeks and Romans did as the Jews.

Some have seen further symbolism in what Abram did to the animals. Ripping them open represented the danger for his descendants, the children of Israel, object of the covenant, who would be assaulted by enemies but would be released again, just as the vultures that came to prey on the carcasses were driven away by Abram.

The Bible itself gives another meaning to this particular mode of sacrifice. It is recorded in the book of Jeremiah that the prophet said to King Zedekiah, “What offense have I committed against you, against your servants, or against this people, that you have put me in prison? Where now are your prophets who prophesied to you, saying, ‘The king of Babylon will not come

against you or against this land?’ Therefore please hear now, O my lord the king. Please, let my petition be accepted before you, and do not make me return to the house of Jonathan the scribe, lest I die there.” (Jer. 37:18-20)

What happened to the animals symbolized what was supposed to happen to the descendants of Abram if they broke the covenant made with God.

Therefore Jesus says, referring to the evil servant who abuses others, “The master of that servant. . .will cut him in two [just as the sacrificial animals were slaughtered when making the covenant] and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites.” (Matt. 24:51)

God’s Land

“Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him.” (Gen. 15:12) Abram went through the same experience that Daniel was to undergo later: “This is the end of the account. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly troubled me, and my countenance changed; but I kept the matter in my heart.” (Dan. 7:28) The Book of Job is even more explicit: “In disquieting thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on me, fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones shake. Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair on my body stood up.” (Job 4:13-15)

Revelations from God given in sleep are often preceded by horror and trembling, as a sort of premonition of the coming of the Spirit.

Palestine, a narrow stretch of territory called the Promised Land, was not formed to provide its occupants with the safety of a final settlement. Situated between strong empires of the north and south, it has always been a crossroads, a nexus of trade between the continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe. It seems Palestine was made to be trodden on. God gave this very land, of all lands, to Abram, thereby indicating that his descendants were not called to have a secure settlement on this earth.

They were to live in Palestine only in passage. It is significant that the very holy celebration of the Jews called *Pesach* (Easter) means “Pass-over.”

Abram was to understand more: Palestine is only a type of the heavenly land, the future inheritance of believers. Looking forward to it with hope, he and those after him died in faith, receiving only part of what was promised. They hoped from a distance and “confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth,” desiring a better, heavenly homeland. (Heb. 11:13-16)

How wonderful faith is! With it you can see things you have not yet acquired. By faith you can anticipate heaven from a distance.

Abram and those who followed after him were wanderers on the earth, knowing that their real home was with God. Today many who call themselves Christians know less about the way to heaven than the things of this earth.

If Abram and his descendants had had a high opinion of the idolatrous world he had left behind, they certainly could have returned to Babylon. But he chose God's way. Just as Ruth the Moabitess, in later years, preferred to gather grain from the edge of a field in the Holy Land rather than go back to Moab, so Abram wished for his seed a better land, even at the price of long years of slavery beforehand.

"That is why," the author of the epistle to the Hebrews says of those who desire a heavenly land, "God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them." (Heb. 11:16) Abram's descendants are all sinners, but God is not ashamed of them. Today any Christian shepherd would be ashamed of a flock resembling the characters of the Old Testament. They were such sinners! But God is not ashamed of them because they had this wonderful yearning in their heart for a better land.

The Responsibility of the Egyptians

When God appeared to Abram in a deep sleep, He said to him, "Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years." (Gen. 15:13)

Abram was told that the promised seed would be an oppressed population. It was from Egypt, not Canaan, that the chosen people were to be called by God for their special role. In fact, this was to be a rule throughout the centuries. That is why Abram did not plead for his seed.

Once God prophesied the oppression of His people, what could they do? And what would be the responsibility of the Egyptian oppressors for their role?

In Deuteronomy, God prophesied that after Moses' death the Jewish people would rise up and seek after the foreign gods of Canaan and would forsake Him and break the covenant He made with them. (Deut. 31:16) That being the case, what responsibility would the Jews bear when they fulfilled predictions made by God? How could they be punished? The answer is simple.

It was predicted that the Jews would be unfaithful, but this was a general prophecy; a remnant always remained faithful in all generations. Every Jew is therefore responsible if he is among the sinners. Each could restrain himself from sinning and be among the remnant.

It was also predicted that the Jews would be oppressed, but it was not predicted what people would be responsible. Why were the Egyptians to fulfill this prophecy?

Although the Bible predicts that “the poor will always be with us,” everyone wants to escape from poverty. Many do so. Then why don’t they make the same effort not to be among sinners as well?

PART V - Genesis 16

Hagar

The same day in which He predicted the Egyptian slavery, the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “Unto your seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates: the Kenites, the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites; the Hittites, the Perizzites, and the Rephaim; the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.” (Gen. 15:18-21)

It was clearly settled what was to be given to Abram’s descendants. The only problem was that Abram had no seed. He had no children because Sarai, his wife, had not borne any.

In desperation, Sarai said to Abram, “Behold now, the Lord has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.” (Gen. 16:2)

Abram listened to what Sarai had to say. “And Sarai Abram’s wife took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan.” (Gen. 16:2, 3)

In this biblical passage we come across the fact for the first time that patriarchs had several wives. The troubles they had reveal how bad this practice was and why polygamy was not God’s original plan.

It was Sarai who induced Abram to compromise. Knowing what God had promised, she did so because she was in a hurry to see God’s words fulfilled. Sarai had in her something of the rush and impatience of a lack of faith.

One should notice the biblical phrase “and gave her to her husband Abram to be his.” (Gen. 16:3) The relationship between Abram and Hagar should be temporary. Abram was to remain Sarai’s husband.

Hagar, once she became pregnant, began to look down on Sarai. Irritated, Sarai turned on Abram: “My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The Lord judge between you and me.”

Abram answered, “Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please.” (Gen. 16:5, 6) When Sarai treated her badly, Hagar ran away.

We should not understand from the story in the Bible that Sarai mistreated Hagar. Certainly she made her feel dependent, perhaps insisting that the child born of the Egyptian would be raised according to Sarai's will and religion.

God Sends Hagar Back to Her Mistress

Of course, that reason was not appreciated by Hagar, and she ran away.

The Angel of the Lord (in the original, "The Angel Jehovah"—an angel who is Jehovah, namely, God) found her near a spring of water in the desert, on the way to Shur, one of the worst of deserts. Appearing to Hagar, He asked, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?" (Gen. 16:8) He reminded her of her real state, which she forgot when she made the decision to run. Of course, the Angel knew all about her, but He asked those questions to arouse her conscience.

She answered, "I am fleeing from the face of my mistress Sarai." (Gen. 16:8)

The Angel of the Lord said, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand." Then He added, "I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude. . . Behold, you are with child, and you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has heard your affliction." (Gen. 16:9-11)

Then Hagar called the name of the Lord who had spoken to her, "You are the God who sees," acknowledging that she had seen the One who saw her.

Returning to her mistress, she bore Abram a son, whom he called Ishmael, according to the commandment of the Lord. Abram, wiser after his meeting with Melchizedek, had no reason to doubt that the Egyptian Hagar could have had a revelation from God, and he named the child according to this vision.

PART VI - Genesis 17

Abram Becomes Abraham

When Abram was 99 years old the Lord appeared to him, saying, "I am Almighty God." (Gen. 17:1) Abram was intended to understand that it was enough for him to see this God; His grace was sufficient.

The Lord continued, "Walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." In the presence of the Almighty, Abram fell on his face. Then God continued, "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations." (Gen. 17:1-5)

Because of this promise to Abram, God saw fit to change his name from the Chaldean form to the vernacular of Canaan. Likewise, his descendants would also have to be assimilated into various environments in order to be—as St. Paul said—all things to all men.

“I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.” (Gen. 17:6) It is true that whole nations were born of Abraham: the Arabs through Ishmael, the Midianites, Sabeans and others through Keturah, the Edomites through Esau, the Jews through Isaac, and all of Christendom through Jacob/Israel (since Christians are spiritual Israel “by adoption.”)

Circumcision

God said to Abraham when he was 99, “This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised.” (Gen. 17:10)

Why did God wait till Abraham was 99 years old? To show that it is never too late for a man to come back to God, that the door is not closed to anyone. But there is something else that is indicated. It is not enough for God’s people to live a moral life, not even a life of faith. Abraham was told to be circumcised after many years of faith.

Circumcision was not only a symbol of the covenant but an essential part of the covenant itself. Circumcision is actually called “the covenant.” A man who did not keep the symbol was considered to have broken the covenant.

Today the principle is the same. It is not enough for a man to live a moral life. It is not enough to live a life of faith. He should receive the signs of the covenant too, most of them ordained by God Himself: baptism, marriage, sharing the offices in church, various prayers, the laying on of hands, and so on. They should not be avoided or trivialized.

These, like circumcision in former times, are outward signs serving to distinguish the people of God from the rest of the world.

Now, the rite of circumcision exists among many savage tribes, but it was not part of the culture of the peoples living in Canaan. Therefore, by this rite Abraham and his family were distinguished from those around them.

But why was circumcision chosen as a sign of the covenant? Because the degeneracy of sin introduced into human nature by the fall was focused on the organ of procreation. Nowhere else does sin appear so strong as in one’s sexual life. That is why the first necessity in order to sanctify life was to sanctify the organ by which life was transmitted. Circumcision functioned in this role.

This rite was very suitable for what God wanted of Abraham: that he suppress what was useless in his life. God did not want Abraham to live without a wife, nor did he want him to be a eunuch. He does not request the impossible, the suppressing of natural desires, but what is possible: restraining them. Circumcision fulfilled this function.

“And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you,” the Lord instructed Abraham. (Gen. 17:11) Circumcision was known in Egypt, before Abraham, and was performed on boys between 8 and 14 years of age; it was also practiced by other peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Americas. It is possible that Abraham learned about it during his journey to Egypt. It would seem that God told him about something he already understood.

“He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations.” (Gen. 17:12) Circumcision of the baby means that before he becomes self-conscious he receives on his body the mark of his destiny as a member of God’s people, a destiny he will later follow. (This is the role of infant baptism.) On the other hand, circumcision at the age of eight days means less pain, both for the baby and for the parents.

The commandment ended with these words: “And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.” (Gen. 17:14) However, the implication is that it is not the baby who is in danger, but the father who did not circumcise him. This appears clearly in the story of Moses, whom God confronted because he had not circumcised his son. (Ex. 4:24-26) God does not wage war on infants. The child is in danger only if he does not circumcise himself when he reaches adulthood, if the rite had not already been performed.

Although this law is firm, the Jews have always understood, correctly, that certain circumstances may entitle them to skip over it, or over any other commandment. The law is made for man, and a man handles it according to circumstances, not the other way around. Thus even after his bitter experience of neglecting to circumcise his boy, Moses decided to consider circumcision of babies born in the wilderness completely useless. (Josh. 5:7) And neither parents nor children were destroyed for this apparent neglect.

At the beginning this was the attitude of God’s people toward the law. This was a precedent for the apostle Paul, who in his epistles taught faithful Christians that they were no longer obliged to respect this commandment, as some of his rivals maintained.

Forms are useful only as long as they distinguish the faithful from the surrounding pagans. When the Jews were alone in the wilderness, they were not at risk for mixing with

others, so circumcision was unnecessary. It is the same today, when pagans have assimilated many of the forms of Christianity.

Isaac Is Promised

After explaining the rite of circumcision, at a time when Ishmael could be very sure of his privileges, God promised Abraham a son by his wife Sarai, now named Sarah, meaning “princess.”

“Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, ‘Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’” (Gen. 17:17) In Hebrew, the word for “laugh” is Itzhak, or Isaac.

This is a common mistake for people who overestimate their powers, as did the apostle Peter, or who underestimate the tremendous forces lying within. Abraham thought he did not have the power to procreate another son, and yet he was to have seven more, six by Keturah after Sarah died. “And she [Keturah] bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah.” (Gen. 25:2)

However, Abraham had reason to laugh.

Speaking this time to Abraham, God promised that Sarah would be “the mother of nations.” Abraham thought it was ridiculous to expect from a one-hundred-year-old man and a ninety-year-old woman the prospect of begetting a people of great promise, let alone whole nations. Even the beginning of the people of God was reason for laughter. If only earthly circumstances are taken into account, the hopes of God’s people are ridiculous even now. They acquire meaning only if God’s will is taken into account as the controlling factor.

“Then God said: ‘. . . Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac,’” namely, Laughter! (Gen. 17:19) The child would bear this name to remind Abraham forever of the distrustful laughter with which he received God’s promise at the beginning.

PART VII - Genesis 18

Under the Oak of Mamre

While Abraham was sitting in front of his tent during the heat of the day, “the Lord appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre. . . So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him, and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground,” this being the customary greeting at that time. (Gen. 18:1, 2)

Although he had recently undergone the pain of circumcision, his first thought was to shelter the three travelers from the burning sun and to slake their thirst. Maybe he was afraid that

after circumcision, which distinguished him from other people, they would not visit him any more.

Then he said, “My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant.” What beautiful words! Abraham, as well as Lydia in the time of the apostles, had the rare talent of making others feel that they were conferring a favor by accepting a favor. Further, he said to the travelers, “Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.” (Gen. 18:3, 4)

“And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts.” (Gen. 18:5) Abraham promised little but in fact provided them a roasted calf, butter and milk. With other biblical characters, he had the positive custom of promising little and doing much.

“And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender and good calf, gave it to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it.” (Gen. 18:7) Abraham knew that any man passing by his tent was sent by God so that he could do something good. That is why he was quick to serve. What is even more beautiful is that the whole household cooperated in the cordial reception of the guests: Abraham, his wife, the servants, whereas Lot, who was to host two of these same men later, would have to do everything alone. His family had not been educated to share his feelings.

Sarah’s Doubts

One of the three men said to Abraham, “I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son.” (Gen. 18:10) Upon hearing this promise, Sarah laughed to herself, as Abraham had done previously. But none of us should ridicule the birth of God’s people.

Then the Lord said, “Why did Sarah laugh?”—as He might ask us about the appropriateness of our laughter. And now a detail that shows God’s great delicacy. Sarah, laughing to herself, had said, “After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?” (Gen. 18:12) She had been promised a child and thought she had to have everything that accompanies conception, as well as the natural capacity to give birth. In her mind, the baby could only be the result of natural desires. When the Lord asked Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?’” He kept discreet silence about Sarah’s reference to Abraham, which would have been offensive to him.

Sarah denied her laughter because she was afraid. But He said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

God Decides to Destroy Sodom and Gomorrah

Then God said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing?” (Gen. 18:17) God decided that because Abraham had been given the promises, he should be initiated into His secrets.

“Because,” the Lord said, “I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.” (Gen. 18:19) The promise made to Abraham was unconditional.

Later, the apostle Paul was to struggle against the idea that God’s promises were conditioned by the fulfillment of the rigid commands of the Mosaic law, which did not contain God’s justified will. Many parts in it are dependent on certain historical and geographic circumstances; a large part is temporary. In many situations the Mosaic law contained a compromise between the will of God and the hardening of people’s hearts.

But one should do “what is right and good” to benefit from the promises of God.

It is true that Abraham had not always done what was right and good. He behaved badly to the Pharaoh, to Sarah, and as we will see to Hagar and the king of Gerar. But he walks the right way, albeit with mistakes. We too should pursue this way in order to benefit from God’s promises.

Then the Lord said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous, I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know.” (Gen. 18:20, 21)

We find the sin of the inhabitants of these cities categorized by the prophet Ezekiel: “Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I took them away as I saw fit.” (Eze. 16:49, 50)

Such a life—which describes society nowadays—is called by God “a very grievous sin.” But God never wants to leave us as He finds us. He promises, “If a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die.” (Eze. 18:21)

Let us take heed to our sins. Let us be careful about the rumors we spread. They reach up to God. And if things are not as represented, God will surely know.

We should not worry if false rumors are spread about us. God checks them first.

Abraham Pleads for the Guilty Cities

“Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the Lord.” (Gen. 18:22)

It is written in the Septuagint, the first translation of the Bible into Greek, “He was one who stood quietly, a *hestos*, before the Lord.” Anyone who wants to come closer to God, who is forever calm, should be calm himself.

The Lord said to Moses, the meekest of men, “Come up to Me on the mountain and be there; and I will give you tablets of stone, and the law and commandments which I have written, that you may teach them.” (Ex. 24:12) If a person has not learned to be calm, God cannot speak to him.

The psalmist wrote, “Be still, and know that I am God.” (Ps. 46:10)

“And Abraham came near and said, ‘Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked?’” (Gen. 18:23)

The answer to this question is contained in the book of the prophet Ezekiel: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Behold, I am against you, and I will draw My sword out of its sheath and cut off both righteous and wicked from you. Because I will cut off both righteous and wicked from you, therefore My sword shall go out of its sheath against all flesh from south to north.’” (Eze. 21:3, 4) Once God’s anger is unleashed, it is no longer selective. The choice is made when God judges beforehand.

But Abraham, unaware of this, asks, “Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it?” (Gen. 18:24)

God destroys a place only when it has added the last straw to its evil, when the cup of iniquity is full. But as long as some goodness remains, the place is spared.

Abraham pleads with God for these cities, to the point where he prays that they will be spared if they contain only ten good people. His sense of justice revolts against the thought that they might be destroyed if there are righteous people within. God agrees with him, thus proving that a sense of justice is the voice of God within us. The bargaining and lowering of the number from fifty righteous people to ten suggests that the number is not all-important before the justice of God. This is very clear as Abraham bargains with Him: “Suppose there were five less than the fifty righteous; would You destroy all of the city for lack of five?” God honors a small number of good people as much as He honors a larger number; it is only justice that is important to Him.

Abraham bargains until he reaches the number ten. He is satisfied with the promise that the cities will be spared if ten righteous people are found in them. He does not pursue his request further because Lot’s family probably consisted of ten persons: Lot, his wife, two unmarried girls, at least two married girls, sons-in-law, and perhaps two grown children. He believed Lot

was faithful together with his whole family. Abraham did not know Lot was the only one among them who was righteous. He would have done better if he had continued to pray. As far as prayer is concerned, God Himself advises us, “Do not request little!”

If Abraham had prayed more, God would have certainly been satisfied with fewer than ten. In the book of the prophet Jeremiah, He says He is ready to forgive Jerusalem if there is only one who fulfills His will, though everyone else is far from the divine ideal. (Jer. 5:1)

That is why Sodom and Gomorrah were not spared. Even Lot, the one righteous person, lingered in spite of the angels’ urging and had to be dragged out of the city, along with his wife and two daughters. As far as we know, only Lot will be saved eternally.

PART VIII - Genesis 20

Abraham in Gerar

“And Abraham journeyed from there to the South, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar.” (Gen. 20:1)

Abraham left for a lonely region, where there was no link to the wilderness of Shur. He went only now and then to the city of Gerar, probably to get supplies. He isolated himself again before Isaac’s birth.

His intention to live in a certain retirement was good, but a groundless fear stirred him to sin again. About Sarah his wife he said, “She is my sister.” He was afraid to claim the beautiful Sarah as his wife, for fear people in the city would kill him because of her. “And Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah.” (Gen. 20:2)

Abimelech, not knowing that Sarah was Abraham’s wife, sent and took her to him. It seems strange to us that the king of Gerar lusted after her, especially since she was ninety years old. But apparently, despite her advanced age, she had kept herself beautiful through a divine miracle.

The sin was Abraham’s. It was more serious this time, since this was his second such offense. Furthermore, how could he prostitute the pregnant mother of the child of promise?

“But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night.” (Gen. 20:3)

Throughout recorded history God has often spoken in dreams and night visions, when people are plunged in deep slumber. He has often communicated in this manner with His prophets. However, God appears to both Laban and Israel in dream, indicating that He speaks to the good and the bad.

God said to Abimelech, “Indeed you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man’s wife.” (Gen. 20:3) Long before the law was given on Sinai God punished adultery.

Abimelech, who had not touched Sarah, answered, “Lord, will You slay a righteous nation also?” He knew what had happened to Sodom and Gomorrah, those guilty cities. But would God punish an innocent people? He defended himself before God: “Did he not say to me, ‘She is my sister’? And she, even she herself said, ‘He is my brother.’ In the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands I have done this.” (Gen. 20:5)

God answered Abimelech in a dream: “Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart.”

Abimelech stated that he had a justified heart and innocent hands. God concedes the first but not the fact that the king had innocent hands. Hands are not always innocent, even if the heart is justified. It is possible for a man to commit murder with a clean heart if he has not informed himself about what God desires.

The psalmist writes, “He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully.” (Ps. 24:4) And further, “Therefore the Lord has recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in His sight.” (Ps. 18:24)

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul advises the Corinthians, “Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” (I Cor. 5:8) Sincerity (righteousness) and truth are two different qualities, and we need both. There is such a thing as serving a lie with sincerity. And truth can be subordinated to self-interest, not sincerity. God is pleased only when sincerity and truth are joined together.

So Joshua told the people of God, “Now, therefore, fear the Lord, serve Him in sincerity and truth.” (Josh. 24:14) However, God is not unfair; He appreciates a justified heart even if it makes a mistake. That is why He says to Abimelech, “I kept you from committing a sin, because you acted with a justified heart.” (Gen. 20:6)

God ended His talk with Abimelech by instructing him, “Now therefore, restore the man’s wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live.” (Gen. 20:7)

Abraham, who engaged in trickery, was however a prophet. And Abimelech’s welfare depended on his prayer. God was not ashamed to take a distrustful person, a liar and a cheat, to

be His prophet. He was not ashamed because Abraham loved Him, had faith in His promises, and yearned for a heavenly land. Faith and love are of primary importance to God.

Abraham Defends Himself Before Abimelech

Abimelech called Abraham and asked him, “What have you done to us? How have I offended you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done.” (Gen. 20:9, 10)

Abraham tried to defend himself, saying, “I thought, surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will kill me on account of my wife.” (Gen. 20:11) But what kind of excuse was that? He excused himself by the very same reasoning that caused him to sin, namely, lack of faith in God. He showed that his thinking was wrong.

Abraham said further, “When God caused me to wander from my father’s house, . . . I said to her, ‘This is your kindness that you should do for me: in every place, wherever we go, say of me, ‘He is my brother.’””

In the original Hebrew, this phrase contains two very significant expressions. In referring to God (*Elohim*, in Hebrew) Abraham uses a plural verb, indicating that he knew that Elohim, the only God, was a plurality of persons.

This is often encountered in the Bible. Thus, for example, in the Greek original of the New Testament, Paul writes, “Now may our God and our Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you.” (I Thess. 3:11 and II Thess. 2:16, 17) The verb is in the singular because God the Father and the Lord Jesus, although two different persons, form one single God.

The answer that Abraham gave Abimelech was simply an excuse and had no value. Abraham was the one with the sin. But as a prophet of God he knew His oneness but also knew that there were several persons in the Godhead. That is why Abraham was loved and appreciated.

The other important expression is the Hebrew word *chesed* used in this verse. Abraham says to Sarah, “This is the gift (or kindness) you will do for me.” The word *chesed*, which means gift or kindness throughout the Bible, also appears in Leviticus 20:17. There the Lord issues a command, through Moses: “If a man takes his sister, his father’s daughter or his mother’s daughter, and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness, it is a wicked thing. And they shall be cut off in the sight of their people. He has uncovered his sister’s nakedness. He shall bear his guilt.” In the Romanian Bible it is written, “It is a vile thing,” but taking things literally, it could also have been translated, “It is a gift.”

What does this mean?

It is a peculiarity of the Hebrew to use the same word to express contradictory ideas. For instance, the word *kedesha* in Hebrew means both “saint” and “prostitute.” Mary Magdalene was a *kede*, namely, a prostitute, but one could also say a saint who had not yet found her way. When she met Jesus she changed; it was then that she became a *kedesha* in the real sense of the word.

What happened was that the whole passion she had previously channeled into worldly love turned into an ardent love for the Savior. Mary Magdalene, a *kedesha*, a prostitute, became Mary Magdalene, the *kedesha*, the saint.

Chesed is a similar word. The illegitimate mating of brother and sister is labeled *chesed*, “wickedness.” But a lawless man who meets Jesus and acquires faith can have a wonderful thing happen to him. The greater his *chesed*-wickedness, the greater his *chesed*-gift. For the faithful the gift is a function of his prior sin. The greater the sins, the greater the gift to overcome sin and be saved. Past sins suddenly become a treasure bearing a gift.

“Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” (Isa. 1:18) In this passage Isaiah says that not only sinners but *sins* become white as snow. Sins as red as fire—*chesed*—become as white as snow—*chesed*. Therefore we can all have faith!

Abraham stands before Abimelech as a sinner. But he is the prophet, and because of his faith and his knowledge about the true God, he has been given a gift. Abimelech realizes this, and instead of punishing him, as he could have done as king, he takes sheep, cattle, and men and women slaves and gives them to Abraham, along with restoring to him his wife Sarah. (Gen. 20:14)

In his actions Abimelech was more refined than Pharaoh, who made gifts to Abraham when he first took Sarah to his palace. By contrast, Abimelech offered gifts to the prophet when he restored Sarah to him, out of respect for the knowledge Abraham’s God had imparted to him.

Abimelech said to Sarah, “Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver.” (Gen. 20:16) He is delicate with Sarah, although she too had lied to him. Yet he did not want her to learn from his mouth that the lie had been discovered. That is why he called Abraham “your brother.”

Because of his justified heart and his delicacy with Sarah, “God healed Abimelech.” (Gen. 20:17) It seems he had been stricken with a disease that had kept him from getting close to her. Now once again he is healthy man.

PART IX - Genesis 21

Hagar’s Banishment

“And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken.” (Gen. 21:1)

Less than a year before, someone with the appearance of a man had come before Abraham and had made a promise to Sarah that she would have a son. Now the Bible says plainly that that person was the Lord. So we conclude that even before Jesus’ birth on this earth, even during Old Testament times, God appeared to men in human form. If the Jewish people had understood their own Scriptures, they would not have opposed Jesus, God in human form, with such animosity.

When Sarah gave birth to Isaac, she cried with joy, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?” (Gen. 21:7)

How easily does the human soul go from one extreme to another. When she was promised she would have a baby, Sarah was distrustful. Now her trust is unlimited. She hopes she will again be a mother. That is why she speaks of babies in the plural.

“So the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing.” (Gen. 21:8, 9)

According to the Septuagint, the first Greek translation of the Old Testament, Sarah saw Ishmael playing with Isaac and considered this improper on the part of a slave’s son.

At any rate, it was not a matter of innocent laughter on Ishmael’s part. Sarah had said to herself, “God has made me laugh,” and doubtless she expected others to share her joy. But Ishmael’s laughter probably originated from his insistence on his right as the firstborn. So Sarah said to Abraham, “Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely with Isaac.” (Gen. 21:10)

Her intention was to remove Isaac from the harmful influence of Ishmael. Children of godly promises should be protected from bad influences.

Abraham, who had grown to care about Ishmael, did not like Sarah’s words. Later, he would prove that he was ready for any sacrifice requested by God, even to placing Isaac, the child of promise, on the altar when God asked this of him. But when Sarah proposed that he banish the slave’s son, he was grieved.

We can assume he had no feeling for Hagar, Ishmael’s mother. But the proposition hurt him, because he knew that if isolation from bad influences was a blessing for Isaac, the solution involved removing Ishmael from good influences and leaving him only to his Egyptian mother. The same problem confronts today’s shepherds in the church. Is it good to isolate the faithful

from the unfaithful, contesting their right to be called Christians? The faithful who remain together might develop better, but who will be responsible for those previously considered a part of the flock? Often they are thrown right into the arms of paganism.

There is nothing new under the sun! Abraham's problems still exist.

God solved the problem by telling Abraham, "Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called." (Gen. 21:12) Abraham obeyed Sarah; if Sarah knew how to obey her husband, Abraham also knew what it meant to obey his wife.

"So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water; and putting it on her shoulder, he gave it and the boy to Hagar, and sent her away." (Gen. 21:14)

At that time people did not have great needs. But it was a shame that a rich man like Abraham gave so little to the mother of his child and to the child himself, who was then about sixteen years old, on their departure. Abraham was known to be generous with strangers. When he sent Eliezer to find Isaac a wife, he gave him much wealth. The way he treated Hagar was one more blot on his character.

Abraham's Covenant with Abimelech

Abimelech, king of Gerar, observing that God was with Abraham, took occasion to speak with him again: "Now therefore swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring, or with my posterity; but that according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me and to the land in which you have sojourned." (Gen. 21:23)

At first sight, Abimelech's request seems strange. Why does he, a king, insist upon making a covenant with Abraham, whose unique hope is little Isaac? How could this family be a threat to him? Abimelech's insistence can be understood only if it is assumed that he had knowledge of God's promises to Abraham.

Abraham responded positively to Abimelech. Then he took occasion to reprove him because of a well of water that his servants had seized violently. (Gen. 21:24, 25) Even today in Israel there are more quarrels over water than anything else. People will go to great lengths to get water in a dry climate.

How subtle Abraham was in this circumstance. First he took the requested oath, then offered his reproof. Next, he took seven sheep from the flock—seven being the biblical number of perfection—and gave them to Abimelech. He called that place Beersheba, meaning "well of the oath." Then Abimelech returned to the land of the Philistines.

“Then Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba [according to the custom of that time], and there called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God.” (Gen. 21:33)

PART X - Genesis 22

God Tries Abraham

The Bible continues the story of the patriarch’s life with the words, “God tested Abraham.” (Gen. 22:1)

God does not need to try his people to get information. He knows everything. However, in the Bible God often asks questions as if He were seeking answers. God asks Adam, “Where are you?” He asks Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” Genesis records that God said, “I will go down to see” what was happening in Sodom, as if He could not see from heaven. Exodus records that God gave manna to the Jews “in order to try them.” God also appeared on Mount Sinai to try the Jews. All these expressions are not proofs of God’s ignorance. Their deep aim is to arouse in man the consciousness of his power to make choices.

Man must be made aware of the fact that he is a free human being who must master his actions. God made him free because He Himself is a being who wants to be acknowledged and loved out of the free impulses of his creatures. In the Bible He indicates this with expressions best suited to give us the sense of freedom.

This is the intent of the phrase, “God tried Abraham.” In this phrase, the Hebrew word *nassah*, “to try,” can have two meanings: (1) Man tries (tempts) God, grumbles about the evil he meets, and requests a sign; (2) God tries man, either by allowing suffering or by putting him in uncertain situations where it is difficult to make a correct decision, to see how he will behave. He gives man an intellectual test to reveal what a man thinks of God, and a spiritual test to prove how much a man is prepared to sacrifice by serving God.

This time the word *nassah* has the second meaning. God tries Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his son Isaac.

This command should give Abraham pause, since it was similar to the cruel rituals of Syria. Vestiges of ritual child-sacrifice were found in Babylon, native land of Terah. Greek and Roman writers describe the sacrifice of first-borns with which the history of Carthage was tainted. In troublous times, the father was called upon to sacrifice to the god what was dearest to him in the world. Such a belief was a superstition, a blind and ignorant expression, of the great truth that you must be ready to sacrifice what is dearest to you for the sake of God.

Thus, the Greek legend of Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, is well-known. While hunting, Agamemnon had slain a deer that had been intended for the goddess

Artemis. Out of vengeance she kept his fleet in Aulos by causing the wind to stop blowing. According to an eyewitness, only the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter could atone for the impiety. The slaughter of Iphigenia was prepared; the knife was raised. The goddess interfered, moved Iphigenia to Tauris, and replaced her with a hind-deer.

The sacrifice of children by their parents to appease the gods was not uncommon among those civilizations. Romans and Greeks alike sold and killed their children, seemingly without too great sorrow. Today, how easily some persons sacrifice their children to Moloch and even boast about it! It appears that only mothers have deep feelings of love.

However, to Abraham Isaac is the beloved son. What does God's command to sacrifice him mean in such circumstances? To us it seems brutal. If it were true that this command expresses God's character, that He enjoys asking a father to slaughter his own beloved son, then many of the best people would want nothing to do with Him. Lucretius, one of the noblest Roman poets, made this clear when providing the history of Iphigenia: "This is how much wickedness religion teaches people!"

If God gloats over the killing of a child by his own father, that means that God does not make Abraham better but worse. Abraham might have had many sins in his nature, but he would not have thought of killing Isaac. He could not agree to Ishmael's banishment. Would God teach him to commit this sin too?

God might have troubled Abraham about the things in his life that should have been changed: illegitimate marriage, lies, distrust, bad behavior to Hagar. Why would He also order him to kill his son as well? Luther's wife rightly said, "I cannot believe God asks someone to strangle his son."

The apostle Paul has a special way of characterizing these events: ". . . which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar." (Gal. 4:24) These things have a deeper meaning. The best translators of the Bible are convinced that God set Himself to achieve the work of man's education gradually over time. The relations between God and man are in process. Once you understand this, the moral difficulties of the Old Testament are easily resolved.

Could any spiritual believer today accept a command to kill his child as coming from God? Of course not. He would shrink back in horror. This is proof of the success of God's wise method. We have reached a higher stage: God has brought His people to this point, step by step.

The meaning of the expression “God tried Abraham” is therefore that God “wanted to find out” what stage Abraham had reached. God wanted to see if he understood His character. As it turned out, Abraham had not yet understood it, as he had not understood many other things.

The same was true of Moses. God says to him, “Rise, take your journey, and cross over the river Arnon. Look, I have given into your hand Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his land. Begin to possess it, and engage him in battle.” (Deut. 2:24)

But Moses sent some messengers from Kedemoth desert to Sihon, king of Heshbon, with words of peace. He understood what Abraham had not understood, that the warlike command had been issued only to try the peaceful spirit God desired in His people. When this gentle and calm spirit prevails as an expression of the real character of God, people are inclined to abide in gentleness and peace no matter what they are ordered to do, and regardless of who issues a contrary command. God is happy when His loving, peaceful will prevails in spite of His testing commands that seem to contradict it.

Sometimes an individual refuses to obey what God apparently wishes because he understands the true character of God and realizes that some commands are only trials; they are only disguised questions addressed to the soul: “Who do you say I am?”

By rushing to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham gave an answer not too honorable for God: “You, Lord, are like pagan deities. You demand the same child sacrifices that they do.”

Always Look for the Spiritual Meaning

Abraham’s error was that he understood the command literally: “Offer up your son as a sacrifice.” God’s commands should not always be taken literally.

When God said to Moses, “Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation,” he answered, “Yet now, if you will, forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written.” (Ex. 32:10, 32) Surely God was happy about such an answer.

Let’s observe what David said in the Psalms. He had studied the Book of Leviticus with its dozens of commands about how sacrifice and offerings should be made. After he finished the study, he composed a psalm in which he wrote, “Sacrifice and offering You did not desire; my ears You have opened; burnt offering and sin offering You did not require.” (Ps. 40:6, 7)

In other words, after studying the whole of Leviticus, he states firmly that God does not desire what He ordered in that book, that is, the sacrifice of animals. And if He does not desire animals, surely He cannot desire human sacrifice. This psalm would be enough to show us that God did not ask Abraham to slaughter his son.

Well, then, what about the Book of Leviticus? It too is part of the Bible. There it is written that God requested sacrifices. Abraham heard God's voice clearly, and He did ask him to bring his son for a burnt offering.

True, but we should realize that God's laws are spiritual and should be spiritually and not literally understood.

The apostle Paul writes, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." (Rom. 12:1) To fulfill this command it is not necessary to commit suicide. The word "sacrifice" is not to be taken literally. The meaning of the words is spiritual.

"In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure." (Heb. 10:6) Therefore, God could not have asked for human sacrifice. Far from wanting people to sacrifice their children, God is horrified by such an act and says so clearly: "But [Ahaz] walked in the way of the kings of Israel; indeed he made his son pass through the fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had cast out from before the children of Israel." (II Kings 16:3)

Abraham was wrong in taking God's command literally. When He said, "Bring your son for a burnt offering," He only wanted Isaac to be consecrated to His service.

From today's vantage point we can see what was kept hidden from Abraham. Now we know that God does not ask us to sacrifice our sons, but rather He sacrificed His son for our redemption.

Later prophets of Israel take issue with Abraham's misunderstanding about this matter. The prophet Micah writes, "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams or ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6:6-8)

Abraham Sacrifices Isaac

Abraham did not resist the intellectual test. But if his ideas about God were not the highest, the heavenly Father would appreciate his ardor to perform, quickly and exactly, what he considered His will.

Abraham is wrong in understanding God's command. But for the faithful, even mistakes can bear the fruit of rich blessings. If the nations around him deemed nothing too holy to be

refused to their idols, Abraham was ready to prove that worshipers of the true God were willing to make the same sacrifices.

It was clear in Abraham's mind that the God who had requested him to separate from his family was now requesting him to part from his son. How full of content is each word of God's commands! The first word is "Take!" Abraham heard this a long time before, when the Lord said to him, "Take for me a three-year-old heifer." (Gen. 15:9) Hearing the word "Take," Abraham was ready to rush to the herd and bring a thousand cattle as sacrifice. This time it was not a matter of animals. The Lord says, through the psalmist, "I will not take a bull from your house, nor goats out of your folds. For every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills." (Ps. 50:9, 10)

We too are ready to rush to give God something from our "herds," our possessions. But God does not ask what we are ready to give, what may be of lesser value in our eyes. Rather, He wants our best. He said to Abraham, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." (Gen. 22:2)

Sometimes God requests a precious sacrifice, not only from Abraham, but also from us. If He requests something of great value, do not look for biblical verses to account for your disobedience. Remember that Abraham obeyed quickly.

Accepting this command as God's will, he did not stop to bargain. His obedience was unconditional. Never mind that God's word, known to Abraham, forbade killing. Centuries before, the Lord had said to Noah, "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man." (Gen. 9:6) But God who issues a command is free to change it.

Abraham saw no reason to justify the sacrifice of Isaac. God is not required to justify Himself to man or give reasons for His requests.

Abraham did not take time to argue the fact that the command was in contradiction to the promise given him that Isaac's descendants were to bear the Messiah. Here he exercised his precious faculty, faith. "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called,' accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense." (Heb. 11:17-19)

But what was the reason for the sacrifice he was to make? Isaac was not a martyr for truth, or a price for ransom, or a criminal who must be punished by death, but a good son. Whom

would this sacrifice, made on a lonely mountain without anyone's knowledge, benefit? To all this Abraham had only one answer: "God's voice spoke to me."

The immediate problem for Abraham was what he would tell Sarah. How would he be able to look her in the eye again? How could he go to her with hands and clothes stained with blood, the blood of her only son? He left this to God.

After reaching Mount Moriah, Abraham said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship." (Gen. 22:5) The separation between Abraham and Isaac on the one hand and the servants on the other was done at the foot of the mountain. The one born of promise climbs the heights. The one raised only by Abraham remains at the foot of the mountain.

The separation was naturally done. Abraham did not boast about the deed he was about to commit. But by faith the one who was going to sacrifice Isaac said to his servants, "The lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you." (Gen. 22:5) He did not know how Isaac could return, but he believed it, because God can bring the dead back to life.

"So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son." Isaac, no doubt a strapping youth, was to carry the wood for his own execution, just as Jesus bore the cross, since he prefigured Jesus. "And he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together." (Gen. 22:6)

Then Isaac said to Abraham, "My father!" That loving word must have broken Abraham's heart! He knew that in his hand he held the knife with which to kill his son and the fire to light his pyre. Isaac, puzzled, asked, "But where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (Gen. 22:7)

Abraham answered, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." (Gen. 22:8) The answer has two meanings. It might mean that the son is the lamb, or that there is another Lamb prepared for the complete sacrifice.

Indeed, God had long since prepared the lamb which was to take away the sin of the world—Jesus. It is clear that this was a matter of future prophecy, since the animal God provided to replace Isaac was a ram, not a lamb.

"Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order." (Gen. 22:9) Now is the solemn moment when Abraham reveals to Isaac, "You are the lamb!"

Isaac, though a strong youth who had just carried a pile of wood up the mountain alone, neither runs away, nor cries for help, nor tries to overpower his father. On the contrary, he is the first biblical character who sacrifices himself voluntarily for God.

He had been taught something about a Lamb who was to bear all the sins of mankind. His heart must have rejoiced at the thought that perhaps the honor of being that lamb was his. Just like Abraham, he was ready for the sacrifice. His submission was even more commendable, because God had not said anything to him directly. Only Abraham heard the voice of God. It is a special grace to face death believing without seeing, obeying without hearing the voice of God.

Isaac is ready for the sacrifice. He does not beg for his life, does not try to run, does not fight his aged father, but submits “like a lamb led to the slaughter.” Abraham could have strengthened him through the hope of resurrection, which he must have cherished. Perhaps he talked to him of heaven with all its beauties, its fruit trees, lovely to see and good to eat, where God dwells.

“And [Abraham] bound Isaac his son.” The stricken father tied the dear hands that had reached out so many times to embrace him or to ask for blessings. Then he “laid him on the altar, upon the wood, . . . stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.” (Gen. 22:9)

Stabbing the victim on the altar was something completely unusual. Killing the lamb was always performed apart from the altar. However, it is easy to understand why Abraham had to proceed like this, in order to avoid lifting a dead body onto the altar of sacrifice.

We can imagine the scene. Abraham places his trembling hands on Isaac’s head. He says good-bye to his beloved son with only one kiss, his eyes full of tears. Perhaps he asks for one more kiss for Sarah on behalf of her son who is to die. The farewells are brief and heart-wrenching.

Abraham accepts the role of priest in God’s service. His heart is strong, and with his eyes uplifted to heaven, he raises the knife for the ultimate stabbing. Isaac lies quiet, though the knife is in his father’s hand. He has made his commitment. We too can stay quiet in any critical circumstance if we have such faith in God. With the knife raised, Abraham stands over Isaac, ready to strike: “Wonder, you heavens! Wonder, you earth! The elect of Abraham, the joy of Sarah, the heir of the promise, the hope of the Church, is ready to die by the hand of his own father, a hand that does not shake!”

The scene reminds us of the words of the heavenly Father, recorded by the prophet Zechariah: “Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, against the Man who is My Companion,” says the Lord of hosts. “Strike the Shepherd. . .” (Zech. 13:7)

For Jesus life proceeded inexorably to its appointed end, His death on the cross. But in the case of Abraham, the dark skies suddenly brightened and the sun shone again. The Angel of the Lord “called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham! Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him.’” (Gen. 22:11, 12) The whole episode was only a trial of faith, and though Abraham did not understand fully God’s character, he did reveal, in a splendid manner, that he loved God even more than his son Isaac.

The trial was a success. God would not permit Abraham to break uselessly the commandment “Thou shalt not kill.”

We should be encouraged to deliver to God whatever is dearest to us. He is a faithful God. He will keep our treasures. We should never be hopeless, not for one moment!

God skips over His prior command to Abraham, just as the New Testament cancels so many laws of the Old Testament because they have been badly understood.

Abraham now hears words of praise from the Angel of the Lord—Jesus Himself: “For now I know that you fear God,”—your willingness to commit the deed is accepted by God as the deed itself—“seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” (Gen. 22:12)

We in turn can say this of God: “Now I know You love me, since you have not withheld Your Son from me.”

But Abraham is restless; he is looking for another victim because the sacrifice of the true Lamb should have been prefigured; Jesus was to be sacrificed in our stead. The substitute was provided, the sacrifice was complete, and Isaac was free. (Gen. 22:13)

Then God spoke to Abraham again, saying, “By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore.” (Gen. 22:16, 17)

Previously, the covenant between God and Abraham had mutual terms. Now, after the sacrifice of Isaac, the oath is unconditional, as is the covenant between us and God, which has as its basis the sacrifice of Jesus.

Abraham was ready to give one son, and he is promised many others instead—untold millions. Small things often bring a great reward in their train. How rich was the reward of the widow in Sarepta, who prepared her last loaf of bread for the prophet Elijah: the flour in her pot and the oil in the pitcher were constantly replenished.

The promises of God were later repeated to Isaac and to Jacob, but they were not transmitted by Jacob’s brother Esau or by his first-born Reuben, but only to Judah and to David.

(Gen. 49:10. See also Ps. 105:8-12) These facts indicate that only some Jews will be considered the children of Abraham, heirs of Christ. They are brilliant like the stars of the sky, because they bring many souls to salvation. The rest, though children of Abraham, are like the sand on the seashore. They form the largest part of the Jewish nation, which swallows the doctrines of bitterness and a denial of Jesus as Messiah, dismissing the word of His truth.

God also promised Abraham, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." (22:18) And indeed today there are whole Christian nations.

"So Abraham returned to his young men." How simply this is stated after such a sacrifice! "And they rose and went together to Beersheba." (Gen. 22:19)

Abraham was not the only man ready to sacrifice his child to God. We are reminded from Jewish history of Miriam and her seven sons. Miriam, daughter of Tanahum, was put in prison, together with her seven sons, and they were brought before the Caesar.

Caesar commanded the eldest son, "Worship my god!"

The young man answered, "I cannot deny the Holy One of Israel, who said to us, 'I am the Lord your God.'" Then the young man was taken away and killed.

The second son was called and was ordered, "Kneel before the idol!" He answered, "I will not betray my God, who said, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.'" He too was killed.

The third one was called, and he was commanded to do the same thing. The young man answered, "I would not leave my God, who pronounced the commandment, 'Thou shalt not worship foreign gods.'" So he was killed.

The fourth was called before Caesar, and he heard the same command. He replied, "I will not be unfaithful to my Lord, who advised us, 'Thou shalt not kneel before another god.'" He was slaughtered too.

Then Miriam's fifth son was brought before the Caesar and urged to worship the idol. He answered, "I will not forsake my Lord, who cries out, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is the only God!'" He too was executed.

Then the sixth brother was brought before the emperor, who spoke to him as he had to the others. The young man answered, "I will not turn my face from the Lord, and there is no one but Him" He too was killed.

In the end, Miriam's youngest son was brought and told he had to kneel before the idol. The boy answered, "I want to ask my mother for advice." He turned to his mother and asked, "What shall I do?"

Miriam answered, “Do you want only your brothers to sit around their Maker, while you remain outside? Do not listen to this godless man, and do not part from your brothers!”

The boy turned to Caesar again and was asked, “Well, will you obey me now?”

The boy answered, “I will not go away from my God, who said, ‘Today you have chosen Me to be your God.’”

Then the emperor said, “I shall throw down my ring, which bears the face of the idol. Bend down to pick it up, so it will appear that you have fulfilled my will.”

The boy answered, “Woe to you, O Caesar! You want to keep your dignity before your courtiers, and that is why you ask me to do this. But what is owed to your dignity is due even more to the dignity of the Holy One of Israel.” Immediately he was taken outside and put to death.

Miriam then said to the emperor, “Let me kiss my children!” This was permitted to her. Turning to her dead sons, she said, “Tell your father Abraham not to be proud in his heart, because he sacrificed only one son to heaven, whereas I had seven sons and I sacrificed them all.” With these words, she threw herself from the terrace and died. And a heavenly voice resounded, “Merry is the mother of children.”

It was only in the last century that a similar scene took place in a village of Christian Falashas in Abyssinia. They had been attacked by the Malidi tribe, who wanted to force them to convert to the Muslim religion.

But all those who have made such a sacrifice to the true God were the sons of Abraham, while Abraham was the son of an idol-worshiper. The moderns had the examples of sturdy forerunners in the faith, but Abraham did not.

From a logical standpoint, did Abraham’s sacrifice serve a useful purpose? In a certain sense, did he or did he not understand well the command of God?

It had to be settled definitively that a love for God is above all kinds of love; that any other kind of love must be overshadowed by a love for God; that love for God vanishes from a soul who is not willing to sacrifice anyone or anything else for it. In a primitive way, Abraham illustrated this great truth, once for all.

PART XI - Genesis 23

Sarah’s Tomb

Abraham returned in peace from Mount Moriah. Isaac was not permitted to suffer anything. The whole episode seems to have had a happy ending. However, this trial may very well have traumatized the life of a mother.

The Bible is silent about the aftermath of this experience, but sometime later Abraham moved with his family from Beersheba to Hebron. It was here, in Kirjath Arba, that Sarah died. She “lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; . . . and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.” (Gen. 23:1, 2)

Abraham, who was a stranger and a sojourner in the land and had not received the promises, asked the sons of Heth for property for a burial place. They responded readily: “Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places. None of us will withhold from you his burial place, that you may bury your dead.” (Gen. 23:6)

Then Abraham spoke like this: “If it is your wish that I bury my dead out of my sight, hear me . . .” (Gen. 23:8)

Eastern bargaining is not possible without a go-between. Knowledge of these Eastern customs is very important in understanding the Bible, which is a Middle Eastern book that deals with heavenly things in the context of earthly matters. Thus, when the Bible speaks of Jesus as a Mediator between God and man, it speaks of something well-known in Israel, where no covenant can be made without a third person going between the two sides.

And so Abraham continues, “Meet with Ephron the son of Zohar for me, that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he has, which is at the end of his field.” The use of the cave, he thinks, will not trouble the use of the field. “Let him give it to me at the full price, as property for a burial place among you.” (Gen. 23:8, 9)

This is the first business deal of which we read in the Bible, as the ancient world depended largely on barter without money. The first time money is mentioned in the Bible it is for the purchase of a tomb. For, after all, what do people buy with their money?

Ephron the Hittite, encouraged by Abraham’s humble attitude, answered, “I give it to you in the presence of the sons of my people. I give it to you. Bury your dead!” (Gen. 23:11)

Then Abraham bowed before the people and replied to Ephron, “If you will give it, please hear me. I will give you money for the field; take it from me and I will bury my dead there.”

Ephron responded, “My lord, listen to me; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver. What is that between you and me? So bury your dead.” (Gen. 23:12-15)

You have to know the customs of Eastern merchants to understand these words. Ephron the Hittite does not intend to give Abraham the cave for the tomb. On the contrary, he wants to obtain a good price for it. But for the buyer to understand that he wants to sell the cave and the field as well, he says, “I give you the field and the cave that is in it.”

Although Ephron says he wants to give them, Abraham insists on paying the price. Then Ephron answers casually, “The land is worth four hundred shekels of silver.” Pretending he wants to make a gift, he finally declares the value of the field.

“And Abraham listened to Ephron.” In Eastern deals it is necessary to understand what is going on. “And Abraham weighed out the silver for Ephron which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth.” (Gen. 23:16)

Ephron’s attitude is customary in the East. Even today the Arab offers everything as a gift, understanding that the buyer will pay the corresponding price.

We can get lost in the Bible if we do not understand Middle Eastern customs and language. We shall speak a lot about salvation later. Now, we want to say just this: When Jesus offers salvation as a gift, the individual must understand, as Abraham did, that he has to pay the corresponding price for it. Jesus says, “For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matt. 16:26)

You have to give everything for salvation, even if you had the whole world. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” (Matt. 13:44)

If you do not make the connection between biblical expressions and the customs of the East, where Bible characters lived and where the books were written, you can get lost like a European in Arabia who does not understand local customs. You would get in trouble if you expected to take as a gift something that was in fact “offered” as a gift.

Abraham, unwilling to allow the heathen to take credit for his prosperity or well-being, does not bargain either, as is usually the case.

“And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah, before Mamre.” (Gen. 23:19)

PART XII - Genesis 24 and 25

Mission of Eliezer

If the Bible were written according to the desires of the human heart, whole chapters would deal with matters of great significance to us, containing deep secrets, such as the personality of Melchizedek. But often we are given little information. God does not satisfy our curiosity.

Instead, one of the longest chapters in the Bible deals with Abraham’s plan to find a suitable wife for Isaac, the only patriarch who had only one wife. That is because the Holy Spirit, who inspired the Bible, has different criteria about the relative significance of the events. Great

revolutions and the rise and overthrow of empires may have less significance in God's eyes than small details regarding His people. What becomes clear is that God takes care of everything in a believer's life, even including the details of a marriage.

Since Isaac prefigures Jesus, obtaining a wife for him is a symbol of Jesus' marriage to the church, through the ministry of His servants, His shepherds. The church is the bride, Jesus is the Groom.

To his loyal servant Eliezer Abraham said, "Please, put your hand under my thigh; and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell; but you shall go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac." (Gen. 24:2-4)

The angel goes before the servant, not with him. This is a guarantee that the servant will find everything prepared. "And if the woman is not willing to follow you," Abraham continues, "then you will be released from this oath; only do not take my son back there." (Gen. 24:8)

This is how we are released from our task, if those to whom we preach the gospel will not accept it. "Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul." (Eze. 3:19)

Eliezer left and came back with the beautiful Rebekah, who became Isaac's cherished wife.

Death of Abraham

Abraham himself took another wife called Keturah. Some believe that she may have been Hagar, whom Abraham now took as a legitimate wife, amending the injustice he had done to her in the past.

Following Isaac's marriage, Abraham lived another thirty-five years, but the Bible does not say anything about this long period. "This is the sum of the years of Abraham's life which he lived: one hundred and seventy-five years. Then Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people." (Gen. 25:7, 8)

Every man is joined to his people when he dies. Those who make up the people in this world—either the people of God or the people of this world's children—are those whom you too will be joined to after death. They will make up your fellowship in the afterlife. The future life is not a time of laziness; it involves service.

As for Abraham, his apprenticeship is over. Now he is joined to his people. He was a winner in the struggle of faith. This is the end of the life of the patriarch Abraham, "the first fruit of the fig-tree of faith."

The God of Abraham

Anyone reading the biblical story of Abraham's life can't help being impressed by his considerable role in Scripture. Yet it would seem that Abraham was an ordinary man with many fine qualities but also with many common faults. He was not impressive because of a perfect knowledge of God or his great moral stature. He wrote nothing and invented nothing.

Then why is he called "the father of all believers" and "friend of God"? (II Chron. 20:7) Why is God Himself referred to, in both the Old and New Testaments, "the God of Abraham"? (Ex. 3:6; Matt. 22:32) Why does God say this will be His name forever?

The reason is that Abraham had one special quality that outweighed all others, a quality that endeared him to God and enabled him to acquire His gifts: namely, *faith*. For this he is specially recognized in Hebrews 11: "By faith Abraham. . ."

But it was not only Abraham's soul that was redeemed because of his faith. His descendants too are promised the reward of sitting at table with him if they exercise like faith. (Matt. 8:11; Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:7)

Abraham is given as an example of faith to all the generations that have followed him. It is because of him that his descendants are blessed. It is only for the reality of his faith that he is considered worthy of the high title of "friend of God."

He was ordained by God to be the ancestor of the Savior. Even today to be considered a son of Abraham is a special honor. Why? "Because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept my charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws." (Gen. 26:5)

Reading this assessment by the Lord, we can only wonder when Abraham did all of this? We see Abraham breaking the law of love and the moral law of God a number of times.

But his great faith more than compensated for his sins. The greatest sinner, if he has the right faith, is considered justified before God, "just as if" he had obeyed all the commandments and fulfilled all God's requirements.

Just as Abraham was God's friend, so was David much later. The friend, the lover, is always endowed by the one who loves him with all the best qualities that can be imagined. The latter sees no faults in him but only good things. In the eyes of God that was how Abraham was perceived. And that is how He sees those who, through faith, count themselves His children.

Overlooking the patriarch's sins, God calls Himself by another name: "God of Abraham." He is not ashamed to be called our God either, no matter how weak and sinful we are, if we have faith to trust Him. (Heb. 11:16)

Righteousness by Faith in the New Testament

The apostle Paul reflected deeply on these things. He observed that Abraham, the sinner, acquired righteousness from God by the simple fact that he had faith. In his epistle to the Romans he shows us that this is the method ordained by God to acquire righteousness today as well.

Let's apply what we have learned from Abraham's life to learn how we are redeemed by faith. To do this we will concentrate on such teachings in the New Testament, especially those based on Paul's research.

All Are Under Sin

The apostle Paul begins with the fact that "all people, whether Jews or Greeks, are under sin." (Rom. 3:9)

The prophet Micah spelled it out: "The faithful man has perished from the earth, and there is no one upright among men. They all lie in wait for blood; every man hunts his brother with a net. That they may successfully do evil with both hands—the prince asks for gifts, the judge seeks a bribe, and the great man utters his evil desire; so they scheme together. The best of them is like a brier; the most upright is sharper than a thorn hedge; the day of your watchman and your punishment comes; now shall be their perplexity." (Mic. 7:2-4)

The psalmist, whom Paul quotes, puts it succinctly: "There is none righteous, no, not one." (Rom. 3:10)

"None!" The word is easy to pronounce but frightening. How terrible to hear the heavenly Father confess through His prophets that "not one" of the billions of people He created is good. Is there any like tragedy? Imagine the pain of a father forced to admit that all his sons are unworthy.

The prophet Ezekiel quotes God's explanation: "They did not all cast away the abominations which were before their eyes, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt." (Eze. 20:8)

Terrible! No one is exempt from the coarsest sin: idolatry! It is questionable whether Moses could have remained for 28 years in Pharaoh's palace without making concessions to idolatry. Therefore He too is guilty. Aaron, the high priest, tolerated the creation of a golden calf. None of them is justified.

Ezekiel quotes God further: "So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one." (Eze. 22:30) There is no such man to be found—not even Ezekiel, who was grieved and angry when the Spirit raptured him.

“None of you is good.” This is the first great truth that Christianity throws before every man who draws near. What a strange religion! While desiring to make man like God, it begins by obliging him to admit he is wicked. Christianity raises and also humbles him at the same time. Man is promised that he can be a partaker of the divine nature. But the Christian religion is wonderfully balanced. It neither degrades a man, making him unable to achieve good things, nor promises holiness completely without sin. “There is no teaching more proper for a man than this,” said Blaise Pascal, “pointing him to the possibilities he has and to the gift he might lose, either by discouragement, or by the wish to be proud.”

Though we are but worms on this earth, we can become partakers of the divine nature. (Job 25:6) If the Scripture did not begin by telling us what we are, we might become proud. On the other hand, if we were not called to such a high estate, we might well fall into despair.

Therefore God’s first assertion is “There is none righteous, no, not one.” He then continues, “There is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all gone out of the way; they have together become unprofitable.” Then He repeats His first assertion: “There is none who does good, no, not one.” (Rom. 3:10-12)

The apostle James says, “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.” (Jas. 2:10) Before the law we all stand guilty.

In spite of what the apostles have to say, our experience seems to indicate otherwise. We all know people we wouldn’t call wicked. We all know people who do a lot of good. We have all seen unbelievers who have been involved in worthy enterprises.

But let’s compare this to two people who get on a wrong train: one does a good deed, the other a bad. But both of them are on the wrong train. How is the first traveler helped by his good deed? It would not enable him to get to his desired destination. Sin points our lives in the wrong direction. And no matter how many good deeds we do, as long as we continue going in the wrong direction, we are still wicked.

Paul continues to describe the sinners’ predicament: “Their throat is an open sepulcher; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips.” (Rom. 3:13)

The major occupation of countless people is to eat as much food as possible, much of it unhealthful. Thus, their throat becomes a tomb where they bury their life.

Often we do not realize how much one man cheats another. All of us—not simply con artists—are guilty in one way or another.

What individual man can claim that his point of view is the result of logical thought processes insofar as matters of principle are concerned? Does each step in his thinking represent

a logical sequence? When someone offers proof for his opinions, do we examine the proofs impartially? Should we put passion in our thinking? Or do we rather follow the bias of our heart?

We all seem to have a party spirit. We support those who are on our side, in politics, in the arts, in scientific thinking, in religion. We defend what our party, our teacher, our confession thinks with rigor, often without examining the merits of our views. All the arguments on “my side” are right in my eyes. The arguments on “the other side” have no value, no matter how wrong they are. Each person’s mind contains a ready-made mechanism for slanting and cheating. Psychologists speak about self-consciousness, theologians about self-centeredness.

It is a fact that we support certain values only because “our side” thinks alike in fundamental areas. But if asked about our views, we might be obliged to answer that we are relying on others’ opinions. If we present our arguments, they may be forced. We want to maintain our own self-respect by conveying the impression, to ourselves as well as to others, that we are self-assured.

But we deceive ourselves. We observe what is wrong about the other side; we do not see what is wrong in ourselves.

So often, it is pointless to ask a man why he does a certain thing. The reasons he gives may differ completely from his real reasons, which he himself may not understand. The human mind is a fraud. It deceives others and it deceives itself.

If a man is an atheist, he offers “scientific proofs” about his atheism. But he is an atheist not because these arguments have persuaded him, but more likely because at one time he was mistreated or deceived by a religious person, perhaps a clergyman. Therefore, he has feelings of distrust and revulsion toward the one who cheated him. In fact, because of this he refuses to accept the religion that in the past was the link between himself and that person. Logically, this is not sufficient reason to become an atheist. But this man is not an atheist for logical reasons. To maintain his self-image as a rational man, he will nevertheless go to great lengths to bring forth atheistic arguments from all kinds of sources.

Clearly his attitude is a fraud. This man cheats whenever he provides reasons for his atheistic thinking.

The apostle Paul continues with his list: “Their feet are swift to shed blood.” For this they fly by plane or advance by tank. “And the way of peace they have not known.” (Rom. 3:15, 17)

The way of peace is easy to discover. It is said that during the civil war between Hyrcanus and Aristobulus a good man by the name of Onias was taken to Hyrcanus’s camp by force in order to curse Aristobulus. Instead, he prayed in the following way: “O God, King of the

whole world, as those who are standing by me now are Your people, and those besieged are also Your priests, I entreat You neither to listen to any of the prayers of those who are against these friends of mine, nor to fulfill what the latter ask You.” Onias was killed for this prayer, which contained the real road to peace, unknown to those people.

“Now we know,” Paul goes on, “that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.” (Rom. 3:19)

In these words Paul says that these things are valid for all people, even faithful Christians—natural believers, as the Scripture calls them.

Terrible things are recorded about Christians in the New Testament, even about the heads of the church, so that everyone’s mouth should be sealed indeed.

Paul writes elsewhere that “all seek their own, not the things that are Jesus Christ’s.” (Phil. 2:21) In a letter to Timothy, he speaks, in a few words, about a great catastrophe in the church’s life: “This you know, that all those in Asia have turned away from me.” (II Tim. 1:15)

Therefore all are guilty before God, irrespective of their position: the nations, Christians, heads of churches. Every researcher of the divine law discovers this only if, for fear his mouth might not be sealed, he does not seal his ears first.

Anyone who still dares to speak about another man’s sin does not know the law very well, because it would reveal his own wickedness and his mouth would be immediately sealed.

Knowledge about one’s own wickedness would also seal the mouths of those who deny God is love. When a thousand doubts struggle against faith and give the impression that God has no answers, the consciousness of one’s own sins teaches the believer that he cannot justify even one of them. Then he sees that we are all wicked and that God is love indeed.

Why People Do Not Recognize Their Sins

It is to this state that we have to reach. To see our own wickedness, we have to have our mouth sealed for the gift of God’s love to descend to us, something we don’t deserve and cannot earn.

But how is it that most people living in the world are unaware that their lives lack the essential element of righteousness? The reason they do not see their sin is that they do not have light in Christ.

By candlelight a house may seem clean and well-swept, but let in the sunlight and the dust and spots appear. By the same token, the natural man sees himself as good, law-abiding, and worthy of commendation. It seems to him he is doing his duty. He says, “I did not kill, did not

steal, did not cheat” and thinks he is justified. But in the light of Christ, he sees that his life is charged with sin.

Another reason people are not sensitive to their lack of righteousness is that they are immersed in sin. Scientists have estimated that the atmosphere presses upon us with about 32,000 pounds of force. Imagine yourself bearing this weight on your back! But because air presses on you from all sides, you’re not aware of it. Fish who live in water do not feel the weight of the water. In like manner, sinners do not feel the weight of their sins because they live in sin.

But when a soul is enlightened by Christ, he feels this weight and has no peace. If like the psalmist he were to ask, “Why are you cast down, O my soul?”, the heart would answer, “Because the weight of sin crushes me on all sides.” This is the nature of sin.

The man who searches himself is forced to acknowledge the truth of the Scripture: “There is none righteous, no, not one.” (Rom. 3:10)

None! There are no distinctions, no excuses, no possibilities of escape. The small differences between one sinner and another may matter to people, but not to God. Whoever is not justified is without excuse. None is righteous.

You will of necessity reach this conviction, unless you act childishly like a certain Brahmin, who considered it a sin to destroy life. He refused to eat meat, fish, or poultry because he felt that anyone who killed an animal, no matter how small, had committed a crime.

One day a missionary said to him, “Your conscience should feel terrible remorse every time you drink a glass of water because you ingest a multitude of living entities that share the same life as other animals on earth.” Then he showed him a drop of water through the lens of a microscope.

The proof was obvious. But instead of admitting the force of the argument, the Brahmin got mad and smashed the microscope.

Many people act like this naive Brahmin. They close their eyes to the Bible and turn their back on Jesus, so that their wicked deeds might not be obvious, even to their own conscience.

Let Us Not Despair

If no man is justified, then you should not despair. It is as pointless to torment yourself about this as for a fish to torment itself because it is not a bird. If no one is justified, that must include you.

The Bible says, “There is no one with knowledge.” Then why berate yourself for not having knowledge, for having a heart of stone? Who has the right to be indignant because he lacks what not even the first apostles had, namely, righteousness?

In the early centuries there were heretics called Pelagians, who claimed that man could avoid any sin. But the experience of believers down through the ages contradicts their assertion. The faithful do have sins, often quite serious sins. What distinguishes them from other people is the fact that in spite of this they are the guardians of God’s Word.

It is man’s nature not to be righteous. We are born in sin, we are begotten in iniquity. With this in mind, we should not torment ourselves in vain or give in to despair. Bossuet said, “It is not good for man to condemn himself completely.” The aim of this self-knowledge is to lead us to choose the way of salvation, which is offered by God to all who lack righteousness.

We Desperately Need Righteousness

None of us is righteous: this is a fact. On the other hand, none of us can afford to give up righteousness. We need it desperately in order to live out our life on earth and to acquire eternal life.

But even in this present life, all the promises of God are made only to those who are justified. And if the promises made to the righteous cannot always be fulfilled in this age, because evil people hinder God’s plans, and if the righteous man loses his life, ultimately righteousness will reign in the kingdom of God. But no one can enjoy the kingdom without being justified.

Therefore, Jesus commands, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” (Matt. 6:33)

If we want to live with God on this earth and if we want to enjoy eternal life, we must acquire righteousness. If we acknowledge this need, what should we do to obtain it?

A person who has come to this point has a real hunger and thirst for righteousness. Thank God, this hunger will be satisfied. In His beatitudes, Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.” (Matt. 5:6) Although we are wretched and sinful, God has made it possible for us to acquire the righteousness we need.

The Bible portrays us in such dark colors not to make us despair but to enable us to glorify God in our lives.

If an artist were to say, “I have traveled far and seen many things in the world, but I have looked in vain for an individual worthy of being painted. I have not found one single perfect,

beautiful face to paint. I find some fault in every one. I looked in vain!”—would this be a sign that the painter was a great artist?

If another painter were to say, “I neither pretend to be an artist, nor have I traveled abroad, but within the little group of people who are close to me I have not found one single insignificant face. I have not found one individual with faults who doesn’t also have something beautiful, something noble. That is why I enjoy the art that I serve and that satisfies me, without claiming to be an artist.” Wouldn’t this be the sign that he was the true artist? Doesn’t he bring to his art something the first artist lacks? Art should make life more beautiful, not deny the possibility.

The same is true of love. Real love is not satisfied to discover that none of us is worthy to be loved. On the contrary, real love is ready to discover something worthy of love in each of us. It has love enough for all of us.

And indeed God, the great Artist of love, is not satisfied to view us as ugly and wicked but has discovered something beautiful in us, namely, the capacity to believe. Furthermore, He gives us a beautiful gift, something we most need: a wedding gown symbolizing righteousness.

We, the unworthy, can acquire righteousness. What wonderful news for those who want to be saved and who know that righteousness is necessary if we are to see the kingdom of God.

Salvation by Acts

Of course, the devil never rests. When he sees a soul yearning for righteousness, for salvation, he tries to lure him onto the wrong path. We need to be aware, therefore, of the devil’s frauds.

He approaches the soul that seeks God and proposes in his cleverness something that is close to every man’s heart and mind. He says, “Do you want to be saved? It’s very simple. God has a good, holy, righteous law. It tells people what they should do. Keep the law of God and you will be accepted by the heavenly Father.”

What beautiful words! How enchanting to the human soul! But what a lie, what a fraud is hidden behind these beguiling words!

No religious teaching would seem closer to the truth than this. No religious teaching would seem more reliable, more biblical. However, it is deeply false.

At the risk of unpopularity, at the risk of being considered a man who does not pay due honor to the law of God, the apostle Paul declares firmly and forthrightly, “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight.” (Rom. 3:20)

And to persuade Christians that he speaks truth, he asks a simple question: “This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?” (Gal. 3:2)

Christians are people who have received the Holy Spirit, the most precious treasure of Christianity. This reception of the Spirit is something as definite and noticeable as getting the flu (forgive the comparison). Any true Christian knows whether and when he has received the Spirit.

But how does he receive this gift? Not by keeping the commandments contained in the Bible. (This used to be valid in Old Testament times.)

When the preaching of the gospel issues from deep faith and the hearing of the sermon is accompanied by true faith, those with open hearts receive the Holy Spirit. Others receive the Spirit when they hear a Christian’s confession, or read a Spirit-filled book, or hear a song composed by a true Christian. In all cases it is by hearing.

But if this is how the Spirit is received, and if the Spirit is all a man needs to be considered God’s child, isn’t it obvious that people run in vain after things that do not bring them the Spirit?

We who write and preach and confess have received the Spirit by the simple hearing of faith. Let the devil present at least one example of a man who received the Spirit as a result of keeping the law of God. He cannot produce any such person. Thus he is unmasked; he is revealed as a fraud and a cheat.

The Fraud of This Carnal Teaching

What law of God should we fulfill in order to be saved by our deeds?

The part of the Bible referred to as the Law contains commandments given to the Jewish people thousands of years ago for definite historic, geographic, and climatic conditions. What good would it do for a Romanian or an American or a German to try to fulfill these commandments, which were not issued to them and may not be suitable for present circumstances?

“Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also.” (Rom. 3:29)

Now, if God is the God of the Gentiles (or nations) too, and God did not give these laws to the nations but only to the Jews, and if salvation comes from keeping the commandments of the Law, then a man who is not Jewish would be excluded from the kingdom. It would imply that God was prejudiced.

But God is not the God of only one group of people. He is the God of all nations.

Assuming that a person considered the commandments received by the Jews as applicable for him, could he by fulfilling the acts of the law be saved? Certainly not. And this is why. The deeds required by the law are divided into two broad categories:

(1) Ceremonial law: prescribes a multitude of rites, sacrifices, and rituals with respect to food, washing, etc. But compared to faith that works through love, they would have no value even if they were practical in today's world. Any intelligent person would rebel against the thought that he could be justified before God by performing certain ceremonies.

(2) Moral law: the acts of love prescribed by the law. These acts have in them the power to justify a man before God. "Those who fulfill this law will be considered righteous." But this is a hypothetical fact. In truth, no one can fulfill the law of love, because the law is spiritual and we are earthly slaves sold under sin. Keeping the moral law could make you justified. In fact, the apostle Paul urges you to fulfill it. He "declared first to those in Damascus, and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance." (Acts 26:20)

To Titus he writes: "This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men." (Titus 3:8)

But our worldly, sinful, wretched nature keeps us all from fulfilling these acts, whether we are Jews, Gentiles, or Christians. Our strong carnal nature renders the law helpless.

It is possible we might perform isolated moral acts, but to what end? The Scripture says that "whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, is guilty of all." (Jas. 2:10) Can we be sure of never making a mistake?

The law, far from bringing salvation, brings resentment, since no man can fulfill it exactly. "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.'" (Gal. 3:10) No one can keep them all.

We should take into account that the Old Testament contains deep secrets when it speaks of Sarah and Hagar, whose names have reference to the heavenly and earthly Jerusalem. This allegorical language is sometimes so difficult to understand that, even if there were no other obstacles, we would still not realize which commandments to keep and how.

Influence of Jewish Rabbinism on Christianity

Ask any ordinary Christian, or even some religious leaders, about the implications of keeping the law, and you will probably learn that a man whose merits outweigh his sins is

justified. If his sins outweigh his merits, he is not. If they are in balance, he could go either way (or go to Purgatory, according to Catholic theology).

Yet this is not biblical teaching but a word-for-word reproduction of the rabbinical teaching included in the book *Hilchet Tshuva*. No matter how reasonable it seems, this teaching is false from beginning to end.

The first great principle of those who teach salvation through the deeds of the law is that every man has both merits and sins. We readily admit this. But we deny that a creature of God has some merit in His eyes, first because the idea of merit is completely incompatible with the relationship of the creature to his Creator. Every created being has the duty, by the very act of creation, to love his Maker with his whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to fulfill His whole will. Therefore, no matter what he does, he can never get beyond his simple duty and so cannot claim any merit.

If created beings were free from any obligation to love God or do His will, if they were independent and their own masters, then they might claim merit in loving God and doing His will. In effect, they would be doing Him a favor He would not be entitled to request, just like a man who offers his services to someone he is not obliged to work for. Thus he earns a reward. But this is not the case of the slave, who is his master's property and can only do his duty. Even if he works all day long and is obedient and faithful in his master's service, he still cannot claim any merit or reward. He has done only what he was obliged to do.

To claim merit he must be equal to the other person and perform beyond his expectations. But no created being can do this. He is a debtor, so overwhelmed with his great debt that with all he owns or hopes to gain he could barely pay a tiny fraction of the debt. That is why he can never rely on anything beyond the extent of this debt.

Therefore it is written, "Can a man be profitable to God, though he who is wise may be profitable to himself? Is it any pleasure to the Almighty that you are righteous?" (Job 22:2, 3) If the unfallen angels can claim no merits before God, how much less fallen and rebellious man!

Second, the assertion that man has merits is contradicted by the clear evidence of Scripture. If he has merits, they have to result from the good deeds he has done. He who does nothing good can have no merits. Scripture asserts plainly, "If God puts no trust in His saints, and the heavens are not pure in His sight, how much less man, who is abominable and filthy, who drinks iniquity like water!" (Job 15:15, 16) And again, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any who

understand, who seek God. They have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is none who does good, no, not one.” (Ps. 14:1-3)

If this is true, then no man has merits. If he did, they would spring from a moral principle intrinsic to his nature. But God says he lacks such morality. In fact, He declares, “The whole head is sick and the whole heart suffers.” (Isa. 1:5)

As noted, the rabbinical teaching of the Jews is that if a man’s merits outweigh his sins, he is justified. First, this suggests that a man’s merits can outweigh his sins and therefore he is considered justified. But is there any man whose merits outweigh his sins? Where is the man who keeps any of God’s commandments perfectly? There is a mixture of sin and imperfection in our best acts and endeavors. Often, when a godly thought or an honest intention is conceived in the heart, before it is carried out it is tainted with selfish or unworthy motives that spoil everything. In all cases obedience is not perfect. Thus, our best deeds, because of infirmity or imperfection, become occasions for committing sin, so that our sins are many. Our good deed has sin as its comrade.

If we are honest, we will admit that our sins in thought, word and deed that contain no admixture of good are more numerous than the hairs of our head. But even if we admit that the final result depends not on the number but on the importance of good deeds, there is a sin that extends from the moment of birth to the last hour of our existence—the lack of perfect love for God. He asks it of us every moment, but how often in our daily routine we go about our work without reminding ourselves of Him even once. And how few, how rushed, and often how interrupted are the expressions of our gratitude to God for His love and gifts! Here then is a sin that by its immensity outweighs all our gratitude and service and lowers the power of our will to the depths of hell.

Yet there is another sin, closely related, and that is our deviation from the commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt. 22:39) The best of God’s saints is engaged in a constant struggle with self-love. He may acknowledge his duty to his fellow man; he knows it well and desires to fulfill it. But despite his best efforts selfishness sneaks in again and again and makes itself master over his thoughts and actions. These two sins—lack of wholehearted love for God and unselfish love for one’s neighbor—weigh a thousand times more than the fulfillment of the rest of the commandments, even if they are kept without any shadow of imperfection. It is absurd to speak of our merits outweighing our sins when we have these two sins on our conscience.

There has never been a child of Adam whose sins have not outweighed his good deeds. Therefore, we should abandon any hope of being justified before God if to be justified means that our merits should outweigh our sins.

But let us assume, for one moment, that such a thing were possible, that there was a man whose merits overcame his sins—would this man be considered justified before God? Let us hear first what Moses, the lawgiver, says. Does he promise he will be considered righteous if his merits outweigh his sins? And does he promise eternal life as a reward for imperfect obedience, as do Christian teachers offering cheap grace? Listen to his words:

“Therefore you shall be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess.” (Deut. 5:32, 33)

Here Moses requires perfect obedience as a condition and does not permit one single deviation, either to the right or to the left. Furthermore, he adds, “Now this is the commandment, and these are the statutes and judgments which the Lord your God has commanded to teach you, that you may observe them in the land which you are crossing over to possess, that you may fear the Lord your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your grandson, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged.” (Deut. 6:1, 2)

Here again perfect obedience all the days of your life! Moses leaves no room for some merits and some sins. If a man does what the law asks, he cannot have deliberate sins. If he cherishes sins, he cannot fulfill the living conditions required by the law.

Again, Moses states clearly that the condition of righteousness is perfect obedience: “And the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good, that He might preserve us alive, as it is this day. Then it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to observe all these commandments before the Lord our God, as He has commanded us.” (Deut. 6: 24, 25)

If we accept God’s requirements regarding righteousness, those who hope to be saved by deeds are wrong. They believe that if a man’s merits outweigh his sins he is justified, while God says, through Moses, that man is not justified unless he keeps all the commandments all the days of his life. False tradition promises eternal life to the one who has fewer sins. Moses sets the condition of perfect obedience for life. The man who relies on tradition is convinced that partial obedience is enough to obtain eternal life, and he will die with this hope. But if he is judged by

the law, he will realize, on judgment day, that he has committed a fearsome mistake, since according to this law anyone who does not show perfect obedience is doomed.

Moses did not leave us to draw this conclusion ourselves from the promises he presented, but spelled out the details:

“Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the Lord your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the Lord your God:

“Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

“The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before your face; they shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways. The Lord will command the blessings on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you.

“The Lord will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways. Then all peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you. And the Lord will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which the Lord swore to your fathers to give you.

“The Lord will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand. You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only, and not be beneath, if you heed the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, and are careful to observe them.

“So you shall not turn aside from any of the words which I command you this day, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.

“But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you.” (Deut. 28:1-15)

The conclusion to be drawn is that he who is obedient is blessed, while he who is not perfectly obedient is doomed. Moses does not know anything about an intermediary state. Therefore tradition contradicts Moses' clearest words and proves itself false.

Paul accepted Moses' words. He knew that if any human kept all the commandments all his life and was guilty of only one infraction, this one lapse would result in his being cursed in the eyes of God. But where is there any such person? If Moses tells the truth, every good man's conscience tells him that his sins outweigh his obedience and therefore he is cursed. The eternal salvation of every obedient man is in jeopardy.

There is no deviation from this principle, not even before a worldly court of law. If a murderer or thief is found guilty, he cannot plead his merits against the just sentence of the law. The guilty person can be blameless in every other respect; he can feed the poor and clothe the naked and give his whole fortune to charity, but none of these can make him less guilty. Do we think men are more just than God?

"The soul that sins shall die," says Ezekiel. "But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die." (Eze. 18:20, 24)

This biblical passage cuts right across tradition. There is nothing here about weighing merits against sins, and there is no promise that some extraordinary merits might cancel out sins.

Let us also examine the passage about repentance from evil. "But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die." (Eze. 18:21)

This verse does not describe the wicked as the one whose sins outweigh his merits, but simply as the one who commits sin. Nor does it suggest that numerous merits outweigh his sins; rather, he must turn away from his sins and keep the law. This confirms the doctrine that to be justified in the eyes of God a man should not commit sins but keep all the commandments.

If other proofs are necessary, the case of Moses should suffice. No one would dare to claim more merits than Moses, who spoke with God face to face. Yet Moses' merits did not prevail over an apparently insignificant deviation. Because of his sin, he was doomed to die with a disobedient generation in the wilderness, and he was not permitted to enter the land of Canaan. Therefore, if Moses' merits could do him no good, how vain should be the hope of those who think that their good acts can tip the scales of God's righteous judgment in their favor!

Neither Moses nor the prophets acknowledge an intermediate position between righteousness and evil. Those who fulfill all the commandments of God belong on one side and those who break one of God's commandments on the other. Anyone who examines his own life and heart will soon discover which class he belongs to. A little meditation will convince him that he too has broken God's commandments, that he has neither merits nor righteousness, and that this is why he belongs to the class Moses says is cursed.

Such a conclusion can seem dreadful. And it is dreadful indeed. But the next question is: "Is it really like that?" Anyone can wonder, "Have I kept or am I keeping all the commandments of God?" But the answer might be surprising: "That isn't the question." The situation then is particularly critical, and the curse of God hangs over the sinner, ready to destroy him.

In the end, it is clear that no man can be considered justified by his acts, because no man on earth can do good without sinning.

This is simple fact. We have to yield our pride and present ourselves before divine justice like wretched sinners, expecting only mercy, not a reward. We might well quote Job: "Truly I know it is so, but how can a man be righteous before God? If one wished to contend with Him, he could not answer Him one time out of a thousand." (Job 9:2, 3)

David, who had the same conviction, did not want his merits and sins to be weighed. His prayer was, "Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous." (Ps. 143:2)

The prophet Daniel did not rely upon his merits either. In his prayer he pleaded, "We do not present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies." (Dan. 9:18)

So how can anyone hope to stand before the judgment seat of God, who searches hearts, and hope not only to escape doom but also to obtain a reward because his merits outweigh his sins? Is he more justified than Job, holier than David, purer than Daniel? Or didn't these three men know the way of salvation? Why then did Job say to God, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes"? (Job 42:5, 6)

All who believe in divine revelation know that when the secrets of their hearts are discovered, a right sentence will be pronounced. Therefore, it is most important that a man know how to be well received by God at that time. If rational human beings have the duty to examine their opinions and beliefs in other fields, those who do not examine their standing before God should be considered irrational. A miscalculation in other fields might be overlooked, but a

mistake here is fatal, irreparable, and eternal. How great will be the horror of those who trusted in vanity and deliberately rejected the gracious salvation offered by God!

The doctrine of justification by merits is agreeable to man; it seems very rational as long as he can advance theories, as long as he is not serious. But as soon as death or tragedy approaches and he faces God's judgment, merits quickly lose their luster and credibility. Conscience remains unsatisfied, and reason says that hope based on merits is uncertain.

Salvation Comes Without the Deeds of the Law

To God it is not important what you do to gain salvation, because no matter how much good you do, you are still a debtor. If a man claimed to do all that God required he would still be a wretched slave. No one deserves the kingdom of God because of his deeds, since no one *has* done all he could, in all circumstances.

God does not grant us salvation according to our deeds, most of which are the fruit of causality. A man's acts depend not only on his inner motivation but also on the conditions that confront him. How would a very poor man give to charity? How would an illiterate man study the Scripture? Acts depend on circumstances. But the essence of man remains the same regardless of circumstances. And God considers the heart.

Doesn't life on this earth teach us the same thing? Who is treated according to his merits? What did I do to deserve the existence of the science of physics which benefits me, or of railways on which I travel, or of poetry which I enjoy? These are things we inherit when we are born. Our merits had nothing to do with them. Likewise there is a kingdom prepared for us, without our merits.

Righteousness does not result from our acts, which bring results quite apart from righteousness. The search for salvation by deeds is an outrageous misrepresentation of the religious and moral life.

Law also creates enmity and divides the world into two categories: those who respect the law and those who break it. The first are proud, the second envious. But Jesus "abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace." (Eph. 2:15)

To persuade us that salvation is not by acts, the apostle Paul points to Abraham's life as an example. He asks, "What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?" (Rom. 4:1) If we examine his deeds, one by one, we do not find sufficient reason for his many blessings or his great name, or for his salvation. But what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." (Rom. 4:3)

Therefore, it is not for his deeds that Abraham is considered the father of the faithful.

God has never had a high opinion of the works man undertakes, not even great men. The man who always thinks he must do something is the victim of wrong thinking. “Lord, what do You want me to do?” was the first response of Saul of Tarsus when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, as if He had need of our services. The future apostle was still a prisoner of a non-Christian mentality.

“I have seen all the works that are done under the sun,” Solomon exclaims under inspiration, “and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind.” (Eccl. 1:14)

Then to what end should we “do” so many things? When Jesus visited the home of His friends in Bethany, Martha busied herself doing things for Him, whereas Mary sat at His feet listening to His words. In response to Martha’s complaint about her sister, Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:41, 42) This “good part” was that Mary did not do anything but sat down at the Master’s feet and listened intently to His words.

What should God do with all your works, which bring you no merit? If this were not an invitation to laziness, we would advise people to work less and rest more, thus conserving their energy for great things.

A Will Cannot Be Abolished

Finally, the apostle Paul brings his last argument to show that salvation cannot come by the deeds of the law.

God revealed His will to Abraham and promised his descendants the land, together with all the blessings, without giving a law and making it a condition for the fulfillment of the promises. The law came through Moses some 500 years after Abraham.

Therefore the promise was made to Abraham before any law was promulgated on Mount Sinai. It was given even before he fulfilled the rite of circumcision, so that those who did not participate in any ritual might be able to become his descendants by faith. It was unconditional.

Why Did God Give the Law?

Surely the proofs we have considered should be enough to persuade us that there is no salvation through the deeds of the law. However, we realize that it is amazing for a soul to discover that God gave a law to be observed but that its observance is not even taken into account as a means of salvation. Then why was the law given? What good are moral standards?

They were not given because God had the illusion that we could conform our lives to them. God knows that we are a degenerate race and that there is nothing good in our carnal nature.

The law serves another purpose: to show us our sins. Man is confronted with a moral law that is just and good. His mind, while acknowledging that here is the truth, confesses at the same time that he does not live according to this law. And no matter how hard he tries, he realizes he does not reach the ideal. This is how he discovers he is a lost sinner.

This is the great purpose of the law. It teaches us what sin is and it shows us how wrong we are, just as a mirror reveals to us how filthy we are and what needs cleansing. But just as a mirror does not and cannot wash us but only reveals our condition, so the law cannot correct us but only shows us what great sinners we are.

The purpose of the law is to make you know your sin so that you will begin to pray with the psalmist, “Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous.” (Ps. 143:2)

Thus, the law offers us knowledge but not salvation. On the contrary, it brings wrath, because no man can fulfill it exactly. Paul writes to the Galatians, “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.’” (Gal. 3:10) What man strives to keep the whole law? Then we are all under the curse because of the law and would be lost if God had not provided another way of salvation.

“Yet the law is not of faith.” It cannot save us from sin. It can only have the subordinate role of restricting sin and filling us with a spirit of slavery and fear. Jesus understood this, and that is why Paul pointed out that “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us.” (Gal. 3:12, 13)

The Law—a Guide to Christ

If the Law cannot save us from sin or give us salvation, it is no less true that it has played an overwhelmingly important part in God’s economy: to witness to Jesus and the righteousness He offers us. “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.” (Rom. 3:21)

The law should have revealed to the one who searched its secrets a knowledge about the Messiah who was to come and the salvation He was to bring, through righteousness acquired by faith in Him. However, many who study the law for decades, like some Jews, never discover that it points to the righteousness brought by Jesus. A superficial reader of the law finds, to the

contrary, that it declares as righteous the man who respects the moral commandments and fulfills the prescribed ceremonies. A superficial reading does not lead one to conclude that righteousness and salvation are acquired without lawful deeds.

But let us take another step forward. We have spoken before of the connection between the Book of Leviticus, which is part of the Law, and Psalm 40. Leviticus prescribes a multitude of ceremonies and sacrifices of food and gifts, to be completely burned. Yet the psalmist who knows these commandments and has searched them diligently writes, “Sacrifice and offering You did not desire; . . . burnt offering and sin offering You did not require.” (Ps. 40:6) How could he say this? Doesn’t God desire the things prescribed in His own Law? If not, why did He prescribe them? Didn’t He see that they were written in the book?

“No,” David answers firmly on behalf of the Savior, adding, “Then I said, ‘Behold, I come; in the scroll of the Book it is written of me.’” (Ps. 40:7)

Both the Law and the Prophets write about righteousness by faith in the sacrifice of Jesus, and the sacrificial laws are only a hieroglyphic, a written cipher. Wisdom sees behind the letter of the commandment and anticipates what God really wants. God has only one wish: that people will believe in Jesus and so acquire His righteousness.

In the old ceremonial practices, as well as in the moral law written by the finger of God, we find this new piece of truth: that righteousness is acquired by faith.

Most people are superficial readers of the law. For them the law is impotent. But those who dig deeper, as the apostle Paul did, can say with him, “The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified [considered righteous] by faith.” (Gal. 3:24)

Can One Acquire Salvation Through Other People?

If a person is convinced that salvation cannot come by the works of the law, he is still not out of the devil’s hands. Having been foiled in his attempt to convince man that his merits are sufficient for him to be justified by God, Satan changes his approach and promises salvation through the merits acquired by other people. Jews are promised salvation through the merits of their ancestors: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Christians are promised salvation through the merits of the saints.

But weren’t the patriarchs and the saints sinners too? They could not save themselves by their deeds, even as Abraham, our father, was declared righteous only because of his faith. How then could patriarchs and saints save others?

As we have seen, Abraham lies, Sarah laughs at God’s promises and when she is caught unawares, she defends herself with a lie, Isaac also lies, Jacob cheats his brother. There are such

black spots in the lives of all the saints. How then can their good deeds justify others? No one “can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him.” (Ps. 49:7) Through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord says clearly, “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the Lord.” (Jer. 17:5)

Neither our ancestors nor the saints of old can help us. The prophet Ezekiel addresses the matter plainly: “‘If a man is just and does what is lawful and right; . . .if he has walked in My statutes and kept My judgments faithfully—he is just; he shall surely live!’ says the Lord God. ‘If he begets a son who is a robber or a shedder of blood, who does any of these things and does none of those duties, but has eaten on the mountains or defiled his neighbor’s wife; if he has oppressed the poor and needy, robbed by violence, not restored the pledge, lifted his eyes to the idols, or committed abomination; if he has exacted usury or taken increase—shall he then live? He shall not live! If he has done any of these abominations, he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon him.’” (Eze. 18:9-13)

False teachers would advise such a son to depend on the merits of a faithful ancestor to be received by God. But the Word of God says, “He has done all these abominations; he shall surely die.”

If a Christian requests that someone on earth pray for him, why wouldn’t he request this of a saint as well? However, no other man can save us, no matter how holy he is. For apart from Jesus “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12)

Salvation Only Through Jesus

Every lie, every error, is based on truth. Which truth gave birth to the wrong belief that you can be saved through the merits of the saints?

The basic principle is correct. The guilty person can be saved through the merits of another person who is justified. This is indicated by God Himself. It was illustrated by the sacrifice made in the temple when the guilty man was forgiven based on the death of an innocent animal. In Scripture, therefore, there is the principle of substituting the innocent for the guilty. But this principle does not apply to either the patriarchs or the saints, because they were men with sins.

The Word of God that supplies the principle also provides its correct application. It points to the perfect Substitute, for whose sake God forgives sin. This person is the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ the righteous, “who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree.” (I Pet. 2:24) He is “the Lord our righteousness.” (Jer. 33:16)

Jesus is the God-Man, the only one who had no sin. If He were a man only, He would not have had merits that could be applied to us. He did not owe His Father a human life of obedience on earth; He lived a perfect life of His own will, in close communion with His Father. Thus He gained incomparable merits before the heavenly Father, and these merits of His are accounted to us through our faith. Therefore, the Savior is our only hope.

We are “justified freely. . .through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth to be a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed.” (Rom. 3:24, 25)

In Paul’s epistle to the Romans, the simple truth that “it is Jesus whom God set forth” is expressed. What could stop us from acknowledging our Savior?

God ordained Him to be a sacrifice for propitiation. In the wilderness tabernacle and in Solomon’s temple, the Most Holy Place contained the ark of the covenant. In it were the tables of the law, and above was a lid called the mercy seat, on which the sacrificial blood was sprinkled on the great Day of Atonement.

In the second temple there was no ark and therefore no mercy seat. According to the apocryphal Book of the Maccabees, it was hidden by the prophet Jeremiah just before the Babylonian captivity. But this lack was to be compensated by God. Jesus Himself was ordained to be the propitiation—the mercy seat—for our sins. (Rom. 3:25) Through Him our sins were to find atonement; through Him any soul would be able to obtain forgiveness.

The problem of how God could forgive sins has concerned people from ancient times. Forgiveness of sins is itself an injustice, since justice requires that we reward the good and punish the evil. Thinking people recognize the dilemma: if God is to be righteous, He cannot forgive the sinner. And if God forgives the sinner, He cannot be righteous.

Plato, according to Socrates, said, “It is possible for God to forgive sin willingly, but I cannot see how.”

Meanwhile, God prepared a way for sinners to receive forgiveness so that they could meet God’s demands for righteousness. Before the cross, during the time of God’s long-suffering, the sinner was forgiven through the system of animal sacrifice, hardly a proper expiation for his iniquities. The world was witness to God’s long-suffering, but not to His justice.

But at the proper time God wanted “to demonstrate. . .His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Rom. 3:26)

A new way of forgiving was now revealed by which God is shown to be righteous, while the sinner is accounted pure before Him. This is the expiating sacrifice made by Jesus through His death on the cross. He, the innocent Messiah, became incarnate, identifying Himself with sinful mankind, so that sin was properly punished in His person. Since Jesus paid our debt, we sinners can now be forgiven and considered justified.

Jesus' expiating sacrifice is the receipt that the sinner presents to God. Relying on the merits of Christ and trusting His sacrifice, the sinner is made right with God. Thus it is impossible for him not to receive full forgiveness and justification at the last judgment.

The sinner is now justified. Because of Jesus, and through His merits, he is not only forgiven—he is like a man who has never sinned!

Only Through Faith

Whoever wants this blessing should give up the thought of presenting his own “merits” before God and simply ask for mercy as a sinner. And he must believe he has acquired that mercy through the sacrifice of Jesus. “The just shall live by his faith,” says the prophet Habakkuk (2:4), and the apostle Paul adds, “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God which is through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference.” (Rom. 3:21, 22)

What a wonderful gift! There is no difference. Do you believe in Jesus? Then the righteousness given by God is for you; it is available to anyone who can receive it, no matter what kind of person he is. The only condition is to believe.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Rom. 3:23, 24)

We are considered justified without payment, without conditions, that is, without any condition other than faith in Jesus. Everything is His gift. We simply embrace it.

That is why Luther wrote to Melancthon, in paradoxical language that contains a deep truth, “If you preach, preach not with a fictitious gift, but with a real one. If the gift is real, it should erase real sins. God does not save imaginary sinners. You can be a great sinner and a rotten person. But your faith should be stronger, with a joyful hope in Christ, the victor over sin and death!”

“Therefore,” writes Paul, “we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.” (Rom. 3:28)

This is one of Paul's most important contributions, which he learned from a study of Abraham's life, but which did not influence the Church deeply, as did many of his other thoughts. However, in its depth, the whole of Scripture teaches nothing but this one thing: that man is considered righteous by faith, without the acts of the law. Therefore, we must root this thought deeply in our hearts.

This whole concept of being justified by faith applies not only in the religious field, but as a general principle as well. In human relationships, isn't lack of trust the obstacle to genuine partnership? In spiritual matters, to abolish the obstacle of sin between us and God it is necessary for trust to be established; in other words, we need to have faith, we need to believe God as our father Abraham did.

Even in the many fields of science faith is essential. Anyone involved in scientific research must first have faith in objective reality and in the capacity to perceive it.

The faith that is common coin in other fields Abraham tendered in the field of his relations with God. "For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.'" (Rom. 4:3)

"His faith was considered righteousness" is just another way of saying that Abraham was saved by faith.

But Abraham did so many things that can hardly be considered the deeds of a believer. How can such a man be considered justified? The Scripture says, "But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness." (Rom. 4:5)

What would God have done with Abraham's works? What would God do with your works?

God does not of necessity require your works, and you get no credit for them. But if you claim the privilege God offers, He will consider you, the sinner, as justified. Faith apart from acts He will count as righteousness. And if God considers you dead with respect to sin, you too should consider yourself dead and laugh in the face of sin.

Every time you have sinned, you can take refuge from Satan in the fortress of this verse: "But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness." (Rom. 4:5) You can laugh at Satan as a child laughs at those who pursue him when he takes shelter in his father's arms.

Let us understand once for all that no matter how many deeds are performed, only faith is counted as righteousness.

The psalmist says to God, “All your commandments are faithful.” (Ps. 119:86) In a thousand variations, the Scripture plays one single melody: faith. This is what all commandments ask of you. All the wisdom of a soul is to spend time not in useless works, but in trying to know God better, as did Moses, of whom God said, “I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight.” (Ex. 33:12)

In conclusion, Paul says, “Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.” (Gal. 3:7)

Faith in Jesus

Because Jesus is the Redeemer, our faith should center in Him. Faith in faith is not sufficient, is in fact powerless. It must have Jesus as its object. The Savior says, “You shall die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.” (John 8:24) Elsewhere John says, referring to Jesus, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.” (John 1:12) “Whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

If a person is considered justified by faith, one should not conclude that it is not important which confession he belongs to, so long as he has faith. This is absurd. A person is justified by faith, but not by any kind of faith. Faith is a precise deposit, a unique treasure, always the same in any century (otherwise we would not have the same salvation), formulated in precise terms.

Jude writes, “I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” (Jude 3) The correct faith is a definite doctrine.

“Faith should not be something vague,” wrote Cardinal Newman. “To believe that we are creatures of God means to practically enter the unseen world, it means we should realize the world is not enough for our happiness, it means to rise up to God, to realize His presence, to expect His visit, to try to do His will. To believe means to deliver yourself to God, to abandon yourself into His hands. Faith and obedience are synonyms. But then I should know whom I obey. Faith should be a precise teaching.”

In his treatise on righteousness by faith written to the Galatians, Paul claims that we are redeemed “by faith,” a faculty of the soul. (Gal. 3:24) Elsewhere, Peter explains what should be the object of our faith: “But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved.” (Acts 15:11) Paul adds, “being now justified by His blood.” (Rom. 5:9) Therefore, we should believe in the blood of Jesus, which He graciously shed in our behalf.

When we understand the doctrine that Christ died for our sins, our faith must be activated, because by this faculty of faith we appropriate His gift.

Faith is the marriage of Christ with the faithful soul. As in any marriage, the debts of the bride become the bridegroom's. In like manner, our sins belong to Christ, who burdens Himself with the debt of our impieties before God. On the other hand, the husband's riches belong to the bride, just as Christ's righteousness is bestowed upon the faithful soul. Thus we are justified by faith, by accepting His priceless gift.

But how can a sinner be considered, or accounted, justified? Simply by sharing Jesus' righteousness. God sees things not as they are but as they may become. (Rom. 4:17) This is the realistic way of seeing things. That is why faith is considered righteousness, because faith contains in it the whole root, the whole principle, of righteousness, because it reconciles our nature with God, through Christ. The righteousness of God can be counted to us because we are in the process of being more and more conscious of His character.

Just as God hates sin, traceable to Adam, because it bears the seeds of death, so God loves the sinner because of his faith in Christ's blood, which bears the fruit of the Spirit.

In spite of the stain of multiple sins, the persistence of criminal habits, even wicked thoughts, if a person exercises faith in Jesus' sacrifice on his behalf, he is considered justified. This is why faith justifies a person without the acts of the law. This teaching is the secret of the spiritual sermon! The soul set free from concern about himself is free to deal with others.

With this faith a person no longer fears he cannot be saved because he has broken the law or is still sinning. He knows that "the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith." (Rom. 4:13)

He knows that no man is without sin. And he does not center his happiness in the completely impossible task of living on earth without ever breaking God's will. His happiness is different: it is described in the Psalms: "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." (Ps. 32:1)

This is the happiness of those who have accepted God's wonderful gift.

David himself, author of this psalm, was a sinner but had standing before God, who covered his sin wonderfully.

The story is recorded in I Samuel 21 and 22. David told Ahimelech the priest that he was sent by King Saul on a mission, when in fact he was running away from him. The fact that God did not reveal David's lie to the priest shows that David was a man whose sin was covered.

Happy is the man whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered! David was a king and a great captain of the army, but he does not say, “Happy is the man who wears a crown or is victorious in war,” but “Happy is the one who has the burden of sin taken off his shoulders.” No matter what a person’s social position, if his sin has been taken away, he is happy indeed.

If you saw a man crushed under a burden groaning in pain, would you play soft music to him and lay before him a table full of good food? If you did nothing to relieve the burden pressing upon him, would he enjoy your music and your banquet? Certainly not. Happiness consists in taking the burden away, especially the burden of sin. This is what Jesus offers us.

We assimilate this gift by faith. Like Abraham we become heirs of God through faith.

It is clear that it should be like this. “Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.” (Rom. 4:16)

Could someone become an heir by respecting God’s law? If so, all the uncircumcised would be excluded from the heritage. Furthermore, our salvation would be uncertain, since it would depend on our keeping the Law. But because it comes by faith, it is a certainty for every soul who believes.

Among the seed of Abraham there are those who keep the law. There are also believers full of the fruits of the Spirit who do great acts, but they are not justified before God by these acts. Their righteousness is no more, no less, than the righteousness of anyone else: the essential element is faith. “In the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did.” (Rom. 4:17)

God called Abraham the “father of many nations” (Gen. 17:4) when he had not as yet fathered Isaac. Because His word is a command, He, the Spirit of Truth, can call things that are not as if they were, without lying. At creation when God uttered the words “May light come!” what was nonexistent sprang into being, and indeed light came.

No one has the right to say, “I cannot hope for salvation any more.” Abraham, “contrary to hope, in hope believed.” (Rom. 4:18) What this means is well illustrated by the brief story of a matchmaker who arranged a marriage between two young people and discovered at the last moment that the children on both sides were boys. For a moment his hope fell. But a matchmaker does not give up easily. He hopes against hope. Thinking creatively, he started immediately to look for two girls for the two boys. In the end, everyone was happy and he doubled his money.

Jesus gives us a similar example in the parable of the unjust judge: “There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city, and she came to him, saying, ‘Avenge me of my adversary.’” (Luke 18:2, 3) It seemed hopeless to expect justice from such a judge. For a long time he paid no attention to the tiresome widow. Finally he said, “Yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.” (Luke 18:5)

Jesus drew a contrasting lesson from the attitude of the unjust judge: “And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?” (Luke 18:7)

Because Abraham was not weak in faith, he believed God’s promise that whole nations would be sired by his virtually “dead” body. God doesn’t want us to be weak in faith either. I should not focus on how great a sinner I am but should believe in the promise of God that when Jesus comes again I shall be like Him.

The Christian does not doubt the promise of God but brings glory to God by allowing Him to strengthen his faith.

No doubt Abraham had doubts, but he struggled against them, so that his final attitude was pleasing to God. We too should subdue our doubts.

When a blacksmith makes a chain, can’t he also repair it? Likewise God, who made us and called us to a new life, can mend the soul that is broken.

To bring glory to God means to show by our conduct that we believe God. We are to believe that, just as He could do the impossible for Abraham, so He can love the sinner. This is the right attitude.

Abraham was “fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.” (Rom. 4:21) This is written for our admonition so that we who believe in the One who brought Jesus Christ back from the dead can be fully trusted to fulfill His promises to us that He will save us.

Jesus “who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:20) came back to life “and was raised again for our justification.” (Rom. 4:25) Through Christ, God justifies the sinner, and this is as true today as it was in Paul’s time. God does everything He can to save us. “According to His mercy, He saved us.” (Tit. 3:5) To this end we have been, are being, and will be considered justified.

Paul’s emphasis on salvation by faith, rediscovered in more recent times after dust had covered it for centuries, is in fact a transition from spiritual adolescence to adulthood. The

immature Christian believes the ideal can be attained if he puts forth a sincere effort and exercises will-power. The mature Christian, on the other hand, has discovered that salvation can only be grasped by faith.

A young person might imagine that he acquires righteousness by giving everything to the poor and doing many wonderful works. As the individual develops, he feels more remote from an infinite God through his acts, and his ideal about attaining salvation by his own good deeds begins to fade. The ideal becomes so unreachable that his best endeavors are seen to crumble and his sincerest efforts to appear like a pious joke. In desperation he finally realizes that salvation can only be attained by faith in the free gift of Jesus Christ.

The adolescent does not realize how huge the task is; he begins with the pious illusion that he will make it on his own. The adult, on the other hand, knows by experience that there is a great distance between his acts and the ideal. So now faith has to step in between the two sides and claim before God the expiation provided by Jesus for one's sins. Thus we come to learn that we are saved only by faith. Paul and Luther are perfectly right.

The Acts of Faith

“Before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law,” writes Paul. “But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.” (Gal. 3:23, 25)

At this point, we may ask, “But then why was the law given? What good are all the laws and commandments of the Bible?”

Luther replies, “The whole Scripture is divided in two: the Law and the Promise. The commandments exist only for man to see his helplessness in them, and thus to learn to despair about himself. All the commandments (including those contained in the New Testament) belong to this ancient covenant. And then, the soul in despair acquires promises as a gift.”

If you have received the Promise, deeds are no longer necessary. They will follow as naturally as the sun sheds light without forcing itself to do this, as a pear tree produces pears and an apple tree bears apples. The faithful soul naturally bears fruit: “love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.” (Gal. 5:22, 23)

But deeds have no importance in earning salvation. In this respect, deeds are a matter of indifference to God. Whether the sanctified man sleeps, eats, or is having a rest, he is as pleasing to God as when he sings or prays. The faithful person does good, without relying on himself to reach heaven. He knows that his deeds do not merit salvation but only serve to adorn his faith. Because he has been justified by faith, the man of faith is neither praised nor blamed for an deed.

Before a person can claim that his faith is the right kind, it should have endured the test of time. There is a type of faith based on momentary enthusiasm that sprouts flowers and fades in a day. True faith should have unchallenged experimental value. True faith is reproducible in the lives of others.

For this reason the sons of Abraham are not simply those who belong to a certain sect here today and gone tomorrow, but rather those who have Abraham's faith tried and true throughout the ages. They have the faith once delivered to the saints. They believe God, and this is considered righteousness. They do not run after righteousness by deeds, merits, or ceremonies.

Just as Abraham believed God when He spoke to him, so those with Abraham's faith believe God when He says in His Word that the object of our faith should be Jesus and what He offers through His death and resurrection.

Faith to be real is not just intellectual. It is one thing to believe in righteousness by faith and another thing to have the faith that leads to righteousness.

For example, if you were able to ask Luther's wife if she believed in righteousness by faith, she would certainly have answered "Yes." But once Luther addressed her with the words, "Catherine, do you consider yourself holy? A saint?"

She answered, surprised, "How could I, such a great sinner, be holy?"

Then Luther cried angrily, "This is how the papacy has poisoned souls, by having you focus only on good acts or bad acts. If you have faith, you are holy."

Catherine thought she believed in righteousness by faith, but she lacked the faith that assured her she was justified.

Luther's wife should have understood the essence of the Reformation, but she did not assimilate it. This has been the story of many Christians ever since.

As we have pointed out, Abraham believed God and this was considered righteousness to him. He was not satisfied just to have garden-variety belief in God—he actually believed God. He did not merely believe in the existence of God; he believed that what God said and did was right under all circumstances. It was this faith that was counted to him as righteousness.

Such faith is the only fundamental condition for salvation. Of course, you should believe not simply with your lips but with your heart. It is out of the question for a person who does not want to do what Jesus did to be considered a person who believes in Jesus. It is possible for you not to be perfect in fulfilling this desire. But if the sincere desire exists in the heart of a believer, it guarantees him the righteousness of God.

As for the law, it is now inscribed in the heart of the faithful. Breaking it does not represent a certain fall, an actual separation from God, but a slight distancing, in which we move continuously. Even the sin of straying far from God is not fatal. But what faithful soul does not wish to be closer to his Savior and does not struggle against acts of a worldly nature? The kingdom of God is not for those who persist in worldliness and do not endeavor to free themselves from their slavery!

Without attempting to harmonize the two ideas, the same biblical authors who assure us of salvation by faith also speak of judgment, in which people will be rewarded according to their acts. If there was not such a judgment, what great need would we have of salvation? But if there is such a judgment, it must have a profound effect on our lives. We should live fearing God who is the Judge of all people. The one saved by simple faith is now united with God and often encounters His uncompromising seriousness. He remembers that God gave up His own Son to death, when He was charged with our sins.

Salvation does not set a person free from the obligation to fulfill God's will, but the faith that leads to salvation is the very fulfillment of this will.

We do not know all things now—we see through a glass darkly. But we know two things: that we are saved by faith and should therefore serve God with gratitude, and that we face a judgment and should of necessity fear a holy God. This idea of the Last Judgment is an important corrective to the apostle Paul's teaching about salvation by faith.

We should not make the teaching of salvation by faith an excuse for not blaming our own conscience or making godly decisions against sin.

Paul, while glorifying faith, also speaks of a faith in vain. Faith that is only talk cannot save. It must be fulfilled. Faith is like a naked, hungry body that must be clothed and fed by deeds. A simple intellectual acknowledgment of the truths about God and Christ cannot save. They must be believed and accepted by the heart. To believe means to act on conviction; we must practice what we preach.

Acts of faith have great significance for salvation. Abraham was considered justified not only because of his faith, but also because of his acts, especially his willingness to obey God in sacrificing his only son.

Acts of faith are completely different from the deeds of the law, or moral acts. At times the two are in complete contradiction. The law says, "Thou shalt not kill," but Abraham, by ignoring his fatherly love, which is law of nature inscribed in the heart by God, was ready to sacrifice his son because God commanded him to do so. He believed that God would fulfill His

promises by bringing Isaac back to life again. Centuries later, another biblical character, the prostitute Rahab, saved the Jewish spies who had penetrated Jericho and lied about them, thus betraying her own nation. She believed that God gave Canaan to the Jews and considered her obligations to the God of heaven and earth higher than earthly laws demanding loyalty to her own country and people.

Without acts of faith, how can we rise higher than the devil? Are we saved only because we know the Scripture? He knows it better. Are we saved because we believe? He believes too and trembles. But he has no acts of faith. This is where we differ.

Religion is vain without acts of faith.

A criminal who has served his time in prison, a debtor who has paid his debt, is justified before the law. The criminal who has served his sentence can walk by the police in safety, whistling just like the person who has not committed a crime. He cannot be thrown in jail. But to get a job it is not enough for him to say he has paid his debt to society. He has to prove that he is rehabilitated and can be trusted.

Paul speaks of a legal relationship. Once Jesus sacrificed Himself for us, our debt was paid. The past no longer burdens us. The apostle James says in his epistle that man is justified by his works, thus placing himself in apparent contradiction to Paul. In fact, he does not contradict him at all but speaks of the works that are the result of faith. The person forgiven through Jesus' blood must acquire a moral character and conquer, by great acts, his position in the kingdom of heaven. He has to be rehabilitated. Those who are not rehabilitated will not be entrusted to rule in the future kingdom. It is not enough simply to lay claim to being a forgiven sinner.

The apostle Paul speaks in terms of a living faith. This can save, as a living musician can play and a living shoemaker can make boots. Faith should be a living faith.

A tightrope walker who had mastered his trade asked a child, "Do you believe I can carry you on my back to the other end of the high wire?"

"Oh, yes, I certainly believe that," the child replied.

"Then get on my back," the man said.

"Oh, no!" the child cried in fright. "I couldn't do that."

This is how we act if we claim to believe in righteousness by faith but do not follow it with deeds of righteousness.

It is only against a caricature of faith that James speaks. James agrees that it is living faith that saves and not mere intellectual assent. We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is

never alone; it is accompanied by deeds. This is the point that James is making. “Show me your faith without your works,” he says, “and I will show you my faith by my works.” (Jas. 2:18)

Paul agrees that such acts are a necessity, but he points out the great discrepancy between our little acts and the wonderful heritage we acquire through them.

What we do is insignificant compared to what we are given. And so Paul exclaims, “Salvation is a gift,” or as we would say nowadays, a good bargain, an unexpected piece of good fortune. James, on the other hand, draws attention to the few deeds we should perform.

Both are right. We are saved only by faith. We are judged by our deeds, which are considered proof of our faith.

Paul refers to the possibility of salvation: this is through faith. James points to the proof of salvation: works. Paul writes how pagans are saved. James writes how Christians should witness to their salvation. Paul insists upon the principle that works should spring from faith. James insists upon the idea that faith should be proven by works.

Paul rises against slavery under the law. James rises against impiety. Paul warns people against faith in their own merits. James warns against faith that is devoid of proof.

Then let us take into account that our salvation must be evidenced by deeds, by a holy life and the testimony of others who have had an influence on us. In addition, we have received many blessings through the confession and deeds of others, whose faithful witness has impacted our lives.

“Even so faith, if it has not works, is dead, being alone.” (Jas. 2:17)

Therefore, let us learn from Abraham to believe God, and we shall be considered justified. And let us learn from his life to do great deeds as a result of our faith. Only then shall we be worthy descendants of our ancestor Abraham, whom God called His friend.

And What About You?

Now I must ask you, the reader, what you think about what I have written. What kind of relationship exists between you and God? What kind of faith do you have? What kind of deeds does this faith bear? Do you know the Lord Jesus and His gifts through genuine faith in Him? Have you experienced His gifts personally, or have you never tried to be close to Him? Are you, through saving faith, an heir of eternal life, like Abraham, or will you be expelled from this kingdom? Are you saved—or still lost?

Please consider these questions carefully in the quiet of your own heart and make the decision to be part of the family of faith, a true child of Abraham. Remember that you cannot avoid such a decision because one day we shall all face the judgment bar of God.

“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Heb. 10:31)

But let us, like Abraham, look to Jesus, “the author and finisher of our faith,” who made possible our salvation and will, through the Holy Spirit, produce in our lives the fruits of faith.

Blessed are those “who are of faith,” writes Paul, because they are truly “the children of Abraham.” (Gal. 3:7)

“Blessed are those who do His commandments,” writes John the Revelator, “that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter” the heavenly kingdom. (Rev. 22:14)

