

SALVATION BY FAITH THE MESSIANIC WAY

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The concept of salvation by grace through faith is well-developed in the New Testament. It is discussed in detailed discussions in Romans 4, Galatians 3 and James 2. But in order to know what Paul and James taught about the role of faith, it is essential to have an understanding of its foundation in Genesis 15, describing Abraham's faithful belief in Adonai.

The story actually begins earlier in Genesis 12:1-3 when Adonai promised to make Abram¹ a great nation and a source of blessing for all the families of the earth. That was the declaration of what we call the Abrahamic covenant. Abram then obeyed God's instruction to travel to the land of Canaan (12:4-9), but after arriving he didn't stay there permanently and journeyed to Egypt for a time (12:10-20) before returning to Canaan and making it his dwelling place (13:1-12). So many years had passed from the time that God spoken to him.

The second encounter took place in chapter 15. Abram laments to God that He hasn't brought forth any children into the world and thus was without an heir who was a true descendant (v.2). That was because Sarai, his wife, was physically incapable of giving birth (16:2). That was an even bigger problem than normal childless marriages because God had promised that a great nation would arise from him, and you have to start with one man before you can have a nation.

But Adonai made it clear that Abram would in fact have that heir and He reaffirmed His initial promise of a great nation, saying:

"Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be" (v.5).

This was the turning point in Abram's life. The next verse (6) simply states: "Then he believed in Adonai; and He [God] reckoned it to him as righteousness."

The word translated as "reckoned" (KJV – "counted") is **חָשַׁב** (*chashav*). It has the sense of "assigning something of value to a person that he does not possess for himself." Another way of saying it is "getting credit for something without actually earning it." In our modern experience, it would be like a son or daughter using a credit card to purchase something, and the parents paying the balance when the bill arrives. The son or daughter hasn't done any work to earn this result, it's entirely a gift. And it is based on the relationship between child and parent. So they just use the card by faith and trust the parent to pay the debt. That is the idea being conveyed here.

Abram had no idea how God would pay off on His promise of descendants. He just believed that it would be so. It was a simple expression of faith.

The Hebraic understanding of faith emphasizes the idea of believing something based on evidence, and then acting on it. In fact the word for faith - **אֱמוּנָה** (*emunah*) and the word for truth - **אֱמֶת** (*emet*) share the same root. So the concept of faith among the Jewish people like Abram,

¹ The name of Abram ("exalted father") would later be changed by God to Abraham ("father of a multitude").

involved receiving evidence that was believed to be truthful and then taking the necessary steps to implement that determination. For that reason, it is helpful to think of the importance of being faithful because it conveys the idea of following through on what you believe. In Abram's case, God gave him all the evidence he would need, and when Abram deemed it truthful, he believed it and lived it. That made him a man of faith.

There is nothing stated in Genesis 15 about the salvation of Abraham, however. At that time he was just concerned about hearing God and obeying Him. But it demonstrates the fundamental nature of spiritual faith—it is trusting in God to take care of us, not in our own ability or power. And all the while, we are called to remain faithful by continuing to live responsibly in obedience to God's instructions for our lives.

Not long ago I was out hiking with my wife on a series of trails that entailed about six miles of walking. About five miles into the hike I suddenly realized that I had lost my key to our car that was parked back at the trailhead (I discovered a hole in my pocket). I said a brief prayer to God: "Lord, you know where that key is located. However You want to return it to us is fine." But I didn't expect it to drop out of heaven so I also felt that the responsible thing to do was to retrace our steps and search for it because that seemed to be the most reasonable way that God could bring it to our attention.

And so we went back the way we came, walking slowly, looking into ruts and ground squirrel holes, and kicking clumps of grass with our boots. So our six mile hike turned into a ten mile one, much of which took a really long time. Unfortunately we never found it.

But someone else did. When we got back to the car, there was my key in a small plastic bag underneath the windshield wiper, no doubt placed there by a Good Samaritan, I suppose you could say that if I was a man of pure faith, I would have just marched right back to the car to reclaim my key. But would you have looked for the key as well? I suspect that our common human nature is to try to solve problems like this by taking much of the responsibility upon ourselves.

That's probably what got into Abram's head when he decided to father a son through Hagar, the maid of his wife Sarai. But just as our search for the key did not produce the desired result, the birth of Ishmael did not produce the result of the heir of promise.

God had to send a kind soul to find my key and to care for it graciously until I could receive it. In a similar fashion, God had to make Sarai fertile so that Abram could receive his true heir. And from Isaac would come the nation of promise, and ultimately the Messiah, the one through whom "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3).

The reality is that none of my works of searching for the key mattered. I just believed that it would be found. But someone else accomplished it and I got the benefit. Likewise none of Abram's works mattered in trying to bring about the promise. In spite of his weaknesses, he did believe by faith, as we are told. And it was God who made it all happen. That's what it means when Adonai "reckoned it to him as righteousness." God was pleased with Abram's profession of faith, so Adonai credited him His own righteousness.

This, then, forms the foundation of the progress of revelation in Scripture regarding salvation. None of us merit the benefit of eternal life. None of us can do any work that will ever secure it for us. That is what makes our salvation a result of grace.

The Hebrew word for grace is *חַן* (*cheyn*). It comes from a root meaning "to bend or stoop in kindness to an inferior." It is a picture of a king bending over and granting a blessing to a subject. That would be a totally radical concept in the Ancient Near East. Kings were known to relish their superiority and power, and they maintained the physical posture that goes along with that. But that is what it means when God provides grace to us. He doesn't have to do it, rather it is entirely an exercise of His will. And we are surely inferior to Him. Yet He grants us the blessing of salvation.

In fact, *cheyn*—this word for grace—is an even more profound picture of Yeshua. For He left His rightful position in glory, and stooped to our level and humbled Himself by dwelling on this earth. Yet all-the-while He remained fully divine, He had no sin nature and never committed any sin. So He was the perfect being who was still willing to lay down His life for us who are far from perfect.

The extent of His sacrificial death is so complete that the debt for our sins is paid off one-hundred percent. There is no interest charge and no need for further payments. He paid our debt in full. And that is the greatest act of kindness of all. We just have to receive it by faith, trusting in Him to do as He has promised. For He declared: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies” (Jn 11:25).

Just as Adonai promised Abraham great blessings that he had to receive by faith, we are called to receive the promise of everlasting life by faith. But we have to agree with the terms of His generous agreement. That is what it means when God’s Words says we are “justified by faith” (Rom 3:28; 5:1; Gal 2:16; 3:24).

The story of Abraham also reminds us that he was not perfect. And the same is true for all of us. We all sin. And while we should never use it as an excuse sin and to be content with failure, we need to recognize that it is God’s perfect righteousness that has been credited to us, not our own righteousness that is so imperfect that Isaiah compares it to “filthy rags” (Isa 64:6).

Back in Genesis 15 we are given a description of the way in which God confirmed His covenant promise with Abram. Adonai instructed him to take some animals and to cut them in half and to place them on the ground. This was the customary way of ratifying formal agreements in the ANE, and that would include a covenant like God was making with Abram. Normally both parties of the agreement would walk between the pieces, symbolic of the seriousness of their obligation and expressing that if either of them violated it, the other party could rightly take their life. So it was customary for both parties to obligate themselves to the terms of the agreement.

But that did not happen in this case. God caused Abram to fall asleep, so he never had a chance to walk through the pieces. Thus he was not obligated to fulfill the terms of the agreement. God, on the other hand manifested His presence in the form of “a flaming torch that passed between the pieces (15:17). So by ratifying the covenant in this manner, He alone was obligated towards keeping its terms.

That has important implications regarding the promise of the land in the remainder of the chapter to the descendants of Abraham, and later repeated to Isaac and later still narrowed to Jacob and his descendants. That means God has obligated Himself to keep that covenant, regardless of the worthiness of the Jewish people whose patriarch Abraham was induced to sleep when it was ratified. In other words, it was an unconditional covenant.

But since this chapter is the foundation for the later revelation regarding salvation by faith, you can see how God is the one who is obligated to carrying out our redemption, and all we can do is to believe it and to receive it. All of these concepts we have been considering are wrapped up in Paul’s words:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast (Eph 2:8,9).

So in keeping with the word pictures of *cheyn*, *emunah* and *chashav* that we have been given in Scripture, the true king—Yeshua—has stooped low to give us the gift of salvation. We receive it by the faith that comes from knowing the truth and believing it. And God has credited His righteousness to us without ever working hard enough to earn it for ourselves. Those are the terms of the agreement God has laid out before us.

The question, then, is what is the place of works in our lives if they cannot bring about

salvation? Scripture teaches that they result *because* of our salvation. Right after denying the efficacy of works in salvation, Paul goes on to say:

For we are His workmanship, created in Messiah Yeshua for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

He is affirming the importance of doing things that benefit our lives by growing in spiritual maturity, as well as benefiting others through godly service. They also confirm the reality of our faith. As James tells us: “I will show you my faith by my works” (Ja 2:18). Another way of saying that is: Good works do not bring salvation, but salvation brings good works. And that is part of the Messianic way as well.

Salvation by grace through faith is not just a Christian concept. As the story of Abraham teaches us, it is also a Jewish one. So that means it truly is the Messianic way of salvation.