



Even Without Believing

Genesis 17:1-21

We talk a lot about believing in God. We often speak of faith as those things we have accepted as true, those we have believed. Without recognizing it, we transform our faith and beliefs into good works, restricting God to the maximum limit of our efforts to believe or accept certain truths. If we stop to think on the lives of so many heroes of our faith, their lives were full of doubts. Their faith was something more than the acceptance of truths. It was more like a dependence or commitment than accepting or understanding some or another detail. The truths that counted were those perceived in the actions of their lives, not in their thoughts.

According to commonplace definitions of faith, Abraham had none. How can one claim to have faith in one whose word and promise are matters of laughter? Abraham had already traveled years with God. He had trusted in Yahweh's protection and guidance over the extent of his pilgrimage from Ur to Egypt and back to the land of God's promise. He had experienced God's provision and learned much regarding the distinctive character of Yahweh in contrast to the supposed gods of the peoples around him. His faith was still mixed with a lack of confidence, a lack of acceptance, a lack of comprehension. He worshipped and served Yahweh, but deep down he did not believe completely. He lacked belief.

Of course he did not have the same resources on which to build his faith as we have. He did not have the stories of Peter, Paul, Jesus, Daniel, Gideon, Elijah, and Moses. He did not have the texts we call sacred, relating for us the faith journey of people like unto Abraham. He had some history with Yahweh, for he had begun his pilgrimage with his father from far away Ur. He had heard the same call as his father, to begin the journey and trust Yahweh. Regardless, he was beginning his life of trusting in God, a God whom he was still learning to know.

Certainly, the stories recounting Abraham's life begin with stories of his lack of confidence. His flight to Egypt and the disaster occasioned by having a child by Hagar do not cast him in a great light. As the chapters progress, we see a distinctly different man, but a man of faith with his ups and downs well mingled together. In this story in which God comes near to promise him a son with Sara, what we would call his faith is found shaking again.

Abraham was in conflict between the desire to believe and the uncertainty that crowded him. He saw the effects of the passing years in his life and in the life and body of his wife. He well recognized that she was already passed the period in her life for having a son. He recognized his own incapacity to participate in the same. His science interfered to leave him in doubt. According to the rules of life, as he understood them, God's promise seemed like a joke. At the same time, he wanted greatly for such words of God to be true. He did not want to believe them, however, for he did not want to be hurt on going back to a hope he had abandoned for dead. It would be very depressing to return again to hoping that Sara would give him a son, simply to have such a hope be shown up as a simple illusion. He did not know whether he had the strength to have his hopes dashed once more.

What God had promised was too much to hope. It was a large dream, apparently too grandiose, ostentatious, and exaggerated. He wanted it for himself very much, but he did not want to place himself at risk of hoping that the promise would become reality, only to see his dreams evaporate as a mirage in the desert. He did not want to feel the pain of such a potential deception. To obey was one thing, but to

believe called for a much higher level of risk. He fought with himself, but at the same time extended his hand to fulfill God's instructions, bowing his head in worship.

At times, obeying is the most effortless, the simplest, the easiest thing. It may be rather routine to fulfill one or another required action. There is no need to think, to accept the proposal, or to alter our identity. An action may often times seem alien to ourselves. We do something to fulfill some need without that action stemming from ourselves or from our will. We act as though we were simply machines. An action may so be external to our sense of self. We sometimes protect our faith and our inner selves behind our deeds and actions which may counter them.

Abraham was unsure how to react before the pronouncement of the divine promise. He laughed at the promise. He declared uncertainty in face of God's proclamation. He argued with God that he already had a son who should be enough for God. He did not trust it was really possible for Yahweh to give him another son, and this one through Sarah. He doubted. He laughed. He began countering the word of God. At the same time, he bowed his head before God in obedience and commitment.

What do we do with that? The father of our faith doubted God. The father of our faith laughed at God's promise for him. The father of our faith did not believe when God promised him a son. His science countered the divine word. His supposed knowledge negated that God could intervene in his life in an unexpected way to create life within his wife's womb. Abraham blasphemed in his reaction, negating the power of God, the same God who had created the universe and life in all its diversity. What do we do with this father of our faith? What did God do with him?

Absent from this story are lightning bolts falling from the sky to consume him. Absent is God becoming angry with Abraham for his lack of trust, yelling from the clouds in a voice of thunder. Absent is the earth opening to swallow Abraham for his lack of faith. Absent is any condemnation of Abraham for his impotence in believing God. What God said was, "Though you don't believe...."

Abraham's lack of confidence did not exert any effect upon God. The one who was affected was not God, but Abraham. The fact that he could not trust God did not rob God, so much as Abraham himself, stealing the blessing of resting in the promise and provision he could not see. His faith, however, was not limited to what he could or couldn't comprehend or accept. His faith was still more than the confidence he had in the words and promises of God. Beyond confidence, it was also a commitment with the One in whom he had placed his trust. He trusted in the character and person of God, even when it was difficult to accept his words, promises, and orientation. Even without comprehending, he placed himself to work in fulfilling those things he had recognized as Yahweh's will.

The faith of many of our Biblical heroes was like this. They did not always demonstrate complete confidence in God, God's solutions, or even God's power to overcome the difficulties they faced. At the same time, they continued the path of following and obeying God as a result of their commitment, loyalty, and confidence in the other aspects of his relationship with God.

God knows us well. As with Abraham, God knows when we laugh at his instructions and promises. God knows our difficulties in trusting God's promises and instructions. God does not expect that we never lack understanding and acceptance of all God's plans. God invites us even so to follow with dedication and commitment even without believing completely. This is the reality of real faith.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*