

MA Biblical Studies Integrative Project

**A Study of Faith in the Lives of the OT Patriarchs**

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## I. Introduction

### **Cultural Background of the Patriarch<sup>1</sup>**

Abraham migrated from Ur in Mesopotamia northward to Haran between Tigris and Euphrates, and finally southward to Canaan during the Bronze age (2000-1750BC) as he followed the revelation and promise of God. “The Lord had said to Abram, leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you” (Gen. 12:1-2a NIV<sup>2</sup>).

Similar to Mesopotamian theocracies or city-states ruled by divine: gods or goddesses, both Canaan and Egypt’s religions recognized many gods that resemble either traditions or personified elements of nature. These gods seem to be either indifferent or hostile to humans and require appeasement to earn their favor. These religions affected every aspect of life, from spirituality to farming, from medicine to the rule of society.

Unavoidable, Abraham might also be influenced by these Mesopotamian religions too. Joshua 24:2 stated, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Long ago your forefather, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods.” Although we are naïve and do not know who God, God has His eternal plan for us. When humans are still struggling in the kingdom of darkness, God initiatively approaches the Patriarch and invites them to be part of His eternal plan.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Andrew Hill & John Walton, *A survey of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2009), 78-96.

<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV), copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 1990 by Homnody and Bible House.

## The Key Words for “Faith” in the Old Testament and the New Testament

In Genesis 15:6a: “Abram believed the LORD.” The word **believed** אָמַן (*aman*) is a conjunctive perfect - third person masculine singular verb. Strong’s Hebrew #539 defines it as to support, confirm, or be faithful. NASB translated the word as believe 26 times, believed 11 times, and faithful 21 times.

In Daniel 2:45, “The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and the interpretation is trustworthy.” has a similar word **trustworthy** אָמַן (*aman*). The word’s origin Aramaic corresponds to Hebrew’s (*aman*). Strong’s Hebrew #540 defines it as to trust, believe, faithful, or sure. Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance defines it as believe, faithful, sure. NASB translated this word as faithful, trusted, or trustworthy.

In the New Testament, Heb. 11:1a, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see,” the word **faith** (πίστευō) is originally from a nominative feminine singular noun. Strong’s # 4102 πίστις (*pistis*) defines it as faith, belief, trust, confidence; fidelity, faithfulness. It was derived from Strong’s #3982 (πεῖθō), *believe* (affirm, have confidence) or (persuade, be persuaded). It is used to either convince oneself (human believing) or being persuaded by the Lord (*faith-believing*). Only the context indicates whether Strong’s #4100 /πίστευō (“believe”) is self-serving (without sacred meaning) or the belief that leads to God’s inbirthing of faith. NASB translated (*pisteúō*) as believe 118 times, believed 73 times, believers three times, believes 29 times, and believing ten times.

### What is Faith?

Paul in Heb. 11:1 defined faith as “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Faith always has the element of assurance and evidential value

substantiating the thing we hope for. If there is any tension keeping you from doubting, you can sure that is not faith.

Faith always comes from God and involves His revelation; therefore, faith is beyond belief! When Jesus told people faith was God's gift, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-not by works so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Faith is a gift from God that we receive as His will. Faith is always the work of God and involves hearing His voice. "Knowing that grows within one's heart and directs the very substance of one's life...There is no leap of faith into this knowing. Contemplative knowing involves a leap-some would say a quantum leap-beyond faith."<sup>3</sup>

The gift, once received, becomes the possession of the recipient. Faith is always from God and is purely His work "by His power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith" (2 Thes. 1:11b). As in the Gospels, a person's believing is vital (cf. Heb. 11:6), but a personal encounter with Christ is needed for believing to be transformed into faith (Mt 8:10,13, 9:22,28,29, 15:28; Ac 20:21; Ro 9:32; Gal 3:9,22). Therefore, faith involves belief, but it goes beyond human believing because it involves the personal revelation of God. It is always a gift from God or God's work, but never something we can produce. Our faith believing has eternal meaning when it becomes the transforming work of God. Demons also believe, "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that-and shudder" (Jas. 2:19). But Demons do not have faith granted by God as we did. In summary, the Lord continuously births faith in believers so we can understand and follow God's will, "for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith" (1 Jn. 5:4).

### **1. The Nature of Faith:**

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<sup>3</sup> Gerald May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1983), 135.

The essence of faith is the reliance that unites us with God. Its result will be steadfastness. Similar to the Patriarch, humans are weak and apt to be driven hither and thither. With faith from God, we are transformed into iron pillars. Also, faith sometimes is referred to as a guarantee. In Scripture, faith is God's warranty, certifying that His revelation will come to His way. It is God's warranty that guarantees the fulfillment of the revelation He births within the receptive believer (cf. 1 Jn. 5:4 with Heb. 11:1).

Faith is God's work which means we cannot produce faith ourselves. Instead, "faith comes from hearing our message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). Whatever is not of faith is sin. "and everything that does not come from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23b). Without faith, it is impossible to please God because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him (Rom. 11:6). The Lord offers to bestow faith in people no matter how insignificant they seem. "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it will obey you" (Lk. 17:6). Also, faith is more than intellectual assent, which combines rational knowledge with the conviction and trust of the heart. "By definition, all Christians already have Christ dwelling in them (1 Cor. 6:19 and Col. 1:27) and have the fullness of God (Col. 2:9-10) by virtue of the union with Christ through faith."<sup>4</sup>

## **2. The Object of Faith:**

We rely on God's word as to the future. Our faith has to do with the past, present, and future of Christ. The historical Christ, the living Christ, and the Christ who will come again.

Faith is also used collectively when God has revealed His will, including the full revelation of

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2012), 60.

Scripture. "For by the grace given me I say to everyone one of you. Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of **faith** (4102/*pistis*) God has given you" (Rm. 12:3).

The failure of the first exodus of the Israelites was because they failed to follow God's Commandments faithfully. Therefore, God promised a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34 and Heb. 8:8-12) to continue His eternal savings plan "But God found fault with the people and said: The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Heb. 8:8). Christ's death achieved both the new covenant and a once-for-all sacrifice for our sins (Heb. 9: 11-18), thus bringing the old covenant to the new covenant. As a result of Jesus Christ's redeeming work, those who faithfully persevere their trust in God as they waited patiently for the future promise will be saved.

### **3. The effect of Faith:**

Abraham was not all righteous, but he submitted himself to God and trusted Him, and God accepted that as the equivalent of righteousness. "Abraham believed אָמַן (*aman*) the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). The covenant shows acceptance and the fulfillment of God's promises "For it is by grace you have been saved, through **faith** (4102/*pistis*) and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8,9).

Faith is the conviction and trust, prompted by one's conscious, that God can aid in obtaining or doing something we still not see yet (Matthew 8:13, 21:22; Mark 5:36, 9:23; Luke 8:50; John 11:40). Christian's faith in Jesus is a conviction that He is the Messiah, the eternal salvation in the kingdom of God "If you believe with all your heart, you may...believe that Jesus

Christ is the Son of God” (Acts 8:37). Faith is also applied to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead and He is the Son of God and the Messiah (John 20:8, 25, 29; Romans 10:9). The prominent element of Paul's conception of faith is the grace of God toward sinners as manifested and pledged in Jesus, particularly in his death and resurrection (Rom. 3:25, 4:24 and 10:9; 1 Thes. 4:14.). While John's faith is the true life to be derived from Christ, so one's faith is preserved, strengthened, increased, and raised to the level which it ought to reach “for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (1 Jn. 5:4).

## **II. The Bible Teaches About the Faith (in God) of Abraham**

According to Joshua 24:2, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Long ago your forefather, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods.” Thus we understand that Abraham worshiped other gods before God called him. We do not know “how does God call one person out of anonymity and use that life to challenge and change the world?”<sup>5</sup> But we know that God initiatively calls Abraham out of love, and He has an eternal salvation plan for Abraham to participate.

Possibly from the beginning, Abraham’s action was simply fear and appeasing the newfound god. However, God wants the intimacy of friendship with us, not our fear. We may not be perfect, but God has His program to transform us at His time and plan. As the story of Abraham developed in Genesis, we can see Abraham changed from fearing God to trusting God and finally became a friend of God!

### **1. By Faith Abraham Obeyed**

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<sup>5</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), 87.

When Abraham was called, the Lord simply said to him, “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you;” (Gen. 12:1-2a). Abraham’s quest is risky, for he was only pointed in the direction by that voice with a minimum direction and a promise. “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went even though he did not know where he was going” (Heb. 11:8). With faith, Abraham obeys God’s call immediately, “So Abram left, as the Lord had told him” (Gen. 12:4).

As soon as Abraham and his family entered the Promised Land, he found that “at that time the Canaanites were in the land” (Gen. 12:6b). Abraham reached the land as God directed, but the Canaanites had already occupied it and owned it. Nevertheless, we know that Abraham “By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise” (Heb. 11:9).

“Abram believed the LORD, and He credited it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). Here Abraham is viewed as righteous in God’s sight because he believes unreservedly that the LORD will fulfill His promises regarding a son and numerous descendants even though he did not have a son when he was well above eighty years old. “Abraham is reckoned righteous on account of his faith in God’s promise, rather than because of any deeds performed by him.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, trust and obey sum up the understanding of the Christian life. All we have to do is believe certain things about God and then doing what God asks. God asks is not something we can ever achieve in ourselves. He wants our sins to make us aware of our need for Him. “This is

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<sup>6</sup> T.D. Alexander “Abraham (Abram)” ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D.A. Varson, and Graeme Goldsworthy, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 370.

what Paul meant by God's strength being made perfect in his weakness and was the reason he felt he should boast of his weaknesses (2 Cor. 12:1-10)."<sup>7</sup>

ObeY means listening to God's will and submitting in both conduct and heart "But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted" (Rom. 6:17). Motivation counts because God wants our love and friendship, not just the right behavior. If He simply wanted compliance, he could have created a race of Artificial Intelligence instead of the rebellious humanity.

## 2. Requirement of Faith

"As man lives for God by faith, trusting God and obeying Him as best he knows how, God blesses that man and gives him a quality of life that makes his life of faith deeply satisfying."<sup>8</sup> The LORD makes a series of promises to Abraham, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all people on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2-3). However, God requires Abraham's faith and obedience so that the promises concerning nationhood and the blessing of others may be fulfilled. "From beginning to end, faith expressed in obedience is the hallmark of Abraham's relationship with the Lord."<sup>9</sup>

Still, "mere belief is simply not strong enough to do the job...There is always the threat of doubt, which seems to hold the potential of opening the back door and allowing fear to reenter."<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, We are humans, and we are weak. We can see almost all the individuals who illustrate faith in Hebrews 11 have serious flaws somewhere in their lives. "But

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<sup>7</sup> David G. Benner, *Surrender to Love-Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 55-56.

<sup>8</sup> Max Anders, *30 Days to Understanding the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1994), 224.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander "Abraham (Abram)" ed., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 369.

<sup>10</sup> Benner, *Surrender to Love-Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality*, 76.

for the person who at least stumbles and falls forward in the direction of God's will, there is a divine resource and promise from God."<sup>11</sup> Unlike us, Abraham has neither historical heroes to testify the faithfulness of God nor the Scripture to understand God's will. Based on faith in God, Abraham, the father of faith, got wrong several times and right a few times. Understandable, Abraham was just a human. Therefore, when facing threatening situations (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-8), Abraham twice cowardly persuades his wife Sarah to identify herself as his sister to save his life. "Although Abraham's lack of trust in God is revealed on these occasions, and also in connection with the birth of Ishmael (Gen. 16:1-16), the lapse of faith is outweighed by the faith in God which he demonstrates elsewhere."<sup>12</sup> These episodes portray a principal relationship between God's promises and human faith. Regardless of Abraham's foolishness, he still received favor and success because God had chosen to bless him. "It was God who initiated the relationship. Abraham had not chosen God; God had chosen Abraham."<sup>13</sup> The emphasis here is God's providence. "God's promise to Abraham cannot be voided even when the greatest threat to that promise is the bearer of the promise."<sup>14</sup> Humans may fail the mission, but God will not.

### 3. Reward of Faith

The life of Abraham appears as a movement of forwarding and backward of faith and folly. Frequently, we applaud his faith, but we can also see his absence of faith. "What is it that puts both the positive and the negative events in perspective?...by means of the constantly recurring divine promise."<sup>15</sup> In Gen. 15:1-2, God bolsters Abraham's faith by confirming that He is Abraham's shield, but Abraham's response was, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me

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<sup>11</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), 101-102.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander "Abraham (Abram)" ed., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 370.

<sup>13</sup> Chuck Davis, *Jonah and Me: on Mission with God* (New York, NY: Beaufort Books, 2017), 91.

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 98-99.

<sup>15</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 92.

since I remain childless?” (Gen. 15:2a). Abraham does not feel blessed since the barrenness of Sarah prevents the continuation of the family line. The LORD swore by Himself that Abraham will have a son of his own “When God made His promise to Abraham since there was no one greater for Him to swear by, He swore by Himself, saying, I will surely bless you and give you many descendants” (Heb. 6:13). With the oath from God, Abraham, therefore, believes in God’s promise. Sadly, Sarah tries to make God’s promise come about with her help. She persuades Abraham to sleep with her servant girl, Hagar. Abraham does, and Ishmael is born. “This is the most common mistakes the people of God make. We can either act on fear, or we can act on faith, but not both.”<sup>16</sup> In the time between promise and delivery, people often begin to listen to competing voices, and they wander away from the promise of God. Unfortunately, along with Ishmael comes a clash between the Arabs and the Israelites that has lasted for thousands of years.

Will God’s promise survive? Abraham becomes the standard-bearer for Christians who feel God needs assistant during a potentially damaging and embarrassing situation. Indeed, God’s delays are not denials. God intends to bring Abraham nearer to Him and rely more on Him. When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, God reconfirmed his promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son, which they cannot produce naturally in their old age. “Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I call him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many” (Is. 51:2). God reconfirms His covenant with Abraham “I will make you very fruitful. I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you” (Gen. 17:6). Here is the call for faith not only for Abraham but also for all nations and generations.

Meanwhile, God announces His blessing to Sarah “I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations, kings of peoples will

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<sup>16</sup> Rob Reimer, *Pathways to the King: Living a Life of Spiritual Renewal and Power* (Franklin, TN: Carpenter’s Son Publishing, 2013), 138.

come from her” (Gen. 17:16). Finally, Abraham’s faith shook off his doubts; he believed the Lord fully. What did Abraham believe when he heard nothing new and saw no marvelous manifestation of power? Walter Brueggemann addresses this question rightly: “The new promise for his life is not any expectation of flesh and blood. Rather, he has come to rely on the promise speaker.”<sup>17</sup> “By faith Abraham, even though he was past age-and Sarah herself was barren-was enabled to become a father because he considered Him faithful who had made the promise” (Heb. 11:11). Then miraculously, Sarah gives birth to Isaac when she was ninety years old, which is well beyond the normal age for a woman to have children.

#### **4. By Faith Abraham Offered up Isaac**

Abraham’s faith is being tested when God asks him to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering (Gen 22:2). Abraham came to the highest point of his faith in God. He did not even question God’s unreasonable command of sacrificing his son. Without hesitation, Abraham obeyed God’s command. He “bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son” (Gen. 22:9b-10). Abraham demonstrates his faith and willingness to obey God’s command fully. Deep inside Abraham’s mind, he “reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking he did receive Isaac back from death” (Heb. 11:19). Through faith and obedience, Abraham passed the test. Angel of the LORD called out, “Do not lay a hand on the boy...now I know that you fear God because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son” (Gen. 22:12). The climax of this episode is “So Abraham called the place The Lord Will Provide” (Gen. 22:14a). The name draws attention to God, not Abraham. “It is not Abraham-has-performed, but God-will-provide. Faith

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<sup>17</sup> Dunning H. Ray, *Abraham: The Tests of Faith*, eBook, (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2012), Ch. 5.

then is ultimately based on God's character and the reliability of His word."<sup>18</sup> Abraham believed God and is referred to three times in the Bible as "the friend of God" (II Chr. 7; Isa. 41:8; Jas 2:23). Through faith, God and Abraham enjoyed each other's friendship.

### **5. Through Faith Abraham Becomes a Blessing to Others:**

"You are the Lord God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham" (Neh. 9:7). Abram (exalted father) was renamed Abraham (father of many) by God. "You will be the father of many nations" (Gen. 17:4b). God underlines the importance of the fact that Abraham is not just the father of one family; he will also be the father of many nations. With grace, God chose Abraham out of the unbelievers and entered into a covenant with him and his descendants, promising that the world would be put right through them. "God declared that Abram would be His special agent. He would bless Abraham to live out a purpose: to be a blessing to others!" God was the initiator and guarantor of covenant relationship with His people. "It is a reminder that the chosen nature is always accompanied with the calling to serve as His agent to the other nations."<sup>19</sup>

Abraham's faith and obedience to God are exemplary; his faith is demonstrated in his ongoing obedience to God. Abraham is recognized as the father of faith who received various promises from God filter through both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Most importantly, these promises include the blessing of all the nations on earth through a future king descended from Abraham. "Genesis anticipates a future royal seed (*zera*) through whom God will fulfill His promise to Abraham to bless all nations."<sup>20</sup> The divine promises made to Abraham anticipate the coming of a royal descendant who will deliver God's blessing to all the nations of

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<sup>18</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 109.

<sup>19</sup> Davis, *Jonah and Me: on Mission with God*, 112-113.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander "Abraham (Abram)" ed., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 371.

the earth. Although the Genesis narrative does not identify this future king specifically, the New Testament writers building on the rest of the Old Testament share the belief that the future king is Jesus Christ, the son of David (Heb. 6:13-18). For Paul this seed is Jesus Christ “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed (*zera'*)” (Gal 3:16a). Paul’s interpretation of the term *zera'* as referring to Jesus Christ is in line with the New Testament understanding of Jesus as the Davidic Messiah. Peter also proclaims a similar view that Jesus is the Messiah, the future king, “He said to Abraham, through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed” (Acts 3:25b).

### **III. The Bible Teaches about the Faith (in God) of Jacob**

No doubt, Jacob had heard many times from Abraham and Isaac about God’s faithfulness and how He had fulfilled His promises to them. Clearly, Isaac understands the blessings of God can only be obtained through faith in God. Therefore, when Isaac sent Jacob away to Paddan Aram, Isaac asked Jacob to remember who God is and how He keeps His promises to Abraham. “May He give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham” (Gen. 28:4). So Isaac’s encouragement to Jacob is not about what Jacob should do, but instead on what God would do. Also, he asked Jacob not to marry a Canaanite woman as Esau did. Isaac encourages Jacob to leave Canaan to find a wife and prays that “May God almighty bless you and make your fruitful and increase your number until you become a community of people” (Gen. 28:3).

From Genesis, we observed that Jacob’s life was not flawless. Jacob’s self-centered, self-oriented character drove him to trick his brother’s birthright, father’s blessing, and Laban’s flocks. Jacob may not be perfect, but he valued God’s blessing while Esau despised his

birthright. Esau even married gentile women, which became a source of grief to his parents, Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 26:34-35). Jacob needs spiritual preparation so that he can be transformed from a devious character to a more spiritual character to fit God's eternal purpose.

### **1. Need for Transformation**

Although the privilege of the firstborn in material inheritance was not universally practiced in the ancient world, it was a sort of default position. The firstborn usually received a more significant share from the father because he was expected to become the paterfamilias, having ultimate responsibility for all members of the extended family and the continuing care of the deceased. However, this greater responsibility also came with more significant material inheritance.<sup>21</sup>

Jacob was a self-centered, self-oriented individual. His devious character is evidenced in the following incidents: First, Jacob and Esau jostled each inside the womb of their mother to be the firstborn. Jacob even grasped the heel of his brother when he was born (Gen. 25:22). Second, Jacob took advantage of his brother's hunger; he solicited from his brother to sell his birthright in return for a bowl of stew. Sadly, Esau despised his birthright (Gen. 25:34c), quickly and foolishly sold his birthright to Jacob for a small price. Third, after exploited his brother, he deceived his father deliberately for the blessings of Esau. "God wants us to trust Him enough to meet Perfect Love in the vulnerability of our shame, weakness, and sin."<sup>22</sup> Although Jacob is not perfect, God can transform him to fit His eternal purpose.

When Jacob departed from Canaan to get away from his brother's fury, he was alone and distress. At Bethel, God showed Himself to Jacob and assured Jacob's inheritance of His

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<sup>21</sup> Adapted from Craig S. Keener, and John H. Walton, eds. *NRSV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 62.

<sup>22</sup> Benner, *Surrender to Love-Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality*, 78.

covenant with Abraham through a dream (Gen. 28:13-15). Jacob receives various assurances regarding the land of Canaan, although he still did not get the land yet.

## **2. Preparation for Transformation**

When Jacob arrived at Paddan Aram, he soon became the victim of deception by his uncle, Laban. Ironically, Jacob spent the next twenty years living with Laban, whose character was as deceitful as his own. Yet, Jacob's deceitful character did not change, and he grew his flocks through a deceptive breeding skill, so he owned larger livestock than Laban (Gen. 30:43). With God's blessing, when Jacob leaves Paddan Aram, he leaves with a large family, and numerous possessions as Isaac's blessing did (Gen. 28:3).

God has His time to prepare for Jacob's transformation and never gives Jacob up even he is not perfect. The turning point of Jacob's character came when God told him, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you" (Gen. 31:3). With faith in God's promise, Jacob obeyed God's command returning to Canaan. Despite all that the LORD had done for him in Paddan Aram, Jacob was still worrying about Esau's rage on him regarding stolen his birthright. Therefore, on returning to the borders of Canaan, he arranges all kinds of defensive preparations before meeting Esau (Gen. 32:1-21). The reconciliation between Jacob and Esau not only brings to an end the conflict which had separated them for years (Gen. 33:1-6). Jacob and Esau also agree to dwell in different regions because the land cannot support all of their livestock (Gen. 36:7-8). Esau chose to settle outside Canaan in the land of Seir (Gen. 33:16; 36:6-8). As a result, only Jacob is left living in the land of Canaan as Isaac's blessing. Jacob now formally inherits the land as God had promised it by oath to Abraham and Isaac.

### 3. Transformation

The meaning of Jacob's name is grasp. He grasped the birthright which Esau abandoned. He grasped Isaac's blessing and Laban's flocks. As we discussed before, no one is perfect. But God has His plan and time to transform Jacob. For the second time, Jacob comes to Bethel, where he experienced the LORD's presence when he left Canaan twenty years ago (Gen. 28:10-22). He has a dramatic meeting with the LORD as he is about to reenter Canaan (Gen. 32:22-32). Consistent with his character, Jacob grasped the supernatural being for blessings "Jacob clearly believed the wrestler was a supernatural being."<sup>23</sup> Was Jacob rude when he dared to wrestle with the supernatural being (Gen. 32:22-31) and asking for a blessing; otherwise, he will not let the supernatural being go? (Gen. 32:26). No, Jacob was not rude; he just persisted in holy boldness and hunger for God's blessing. Finally, Jacob got a new name, "your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome" (Gen. 32:28). A new Jacob with prevailing faith in God after God has triumphed over him. Jacob's wrestles with God teaches us that God can oppose us until we make some things in our life right with God and men. "prevails over what seems to be God's permissive will so that His ultimate will may be brought closer to fulfillment" (Bloesch, *Struggle of Prayer*, 113).

After the wrestles and a new name, Jacob's devious character has now been transformed into the perfect Jacob, the man of wisdom and has prevailing faith in God. Before reunion with Esau, Jacob humbled himself to God, "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant" (Gen. 32:10). After he had experienced God's presence and approval, he committed all into God's merciful hands, "I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spread" (Gen. 32:30b). God honors obedience with blessing. God chose Jacob because of his desire for Him and his heart of submission. In Hos. 12:2, Hosea claimed that Jacob passed his unsavory

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<sup>23</sup> Keener, and Walton, eds. *NRSV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, 75.

characteristics to his descendants. But if Israelites turn as Jacob did, “but you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always” (Hos. 12:6). Likewise, we should act like Jacob turning from our wickedness to establishing a perseverance faith in God, our faithfulness God will deliver us as he did to Jacob.

#### **4. Results of Transformation.**

Reconciliation with God must be followed by reconciliation with one’s brother. The transformation of Jacob’s character is evidenced in his reconciliation with Esau (Gen. 32-33), specifically when his name is changed from Jacob to Israel. The reconciliation demonstrates not only Jacob’s new courage but also his humility, Jacob “bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother” (Gen. 33:3b). Then there is a new generosity, “please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me, and I have all I need” (Gen. 33:11). His motive in giving the gift to Esau is genuine. He is no longer devious. God is faithful to fulfilling His calling in us despite our fears and weaknesses. “After transformation, Jacob has a place in two great families, the family of Messiah (Matt. 1:2) and the family of the faithful (Heb. 11:21).”<sup>24</sup> God established Jacob as one chosen “A moment of wrestling with God results in Jacob, a grandson of Abraham, being renamed Israel (Gen. 32),”<sup>25</sup> God renews the Abrahamic covenant with Jacob (Gen. 28:10-22).

Why do we wrestle with God? It helps us to realize our dependence upon God and strengthens our faith. Faith makes us purer and stronger by overcoming the resistance we face in prayer and the obstacles to the answer of prayer. “We must feed on the Word and live in the Spirit, but only as we put faith in practice do we move from theoretical faith to faith as God’s

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<sup>24</sup> Hamilton “Jacob/Israel (person)” ed., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 588.

<sup>25</sup> Davis, *Jonah and Me: on Mission with God*, 92.

means of victory.”<sup>26</sup> When we suffer well and persevere, we go deep. Our character becomes more like Jesus. And character, Paul says, produces hope. When you have a deep character, you have more hope. “When I am going through a trial, and I surrender to God in trust, I experience a new intimacy with God. I will discover a new sense of revelation from God and a fresh sense of God’s presence and power in my life.”<sup>27</sup>

#### **IV. The Bible Teaches About the Faith of Joseph**

The final quarter of Genesis tells the character and role of Joseph in bringing the descendants of Abraham out of Canaan and into Egypt. God has foretold this event to Abraham in Gen. 15:13, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.”

Joseph most likely heard from his father Jacob about who God is and how God had fulfilled His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Although the Book of Genesis did not mention specifically the faith of Joseph, there is a comment on Joseph’s faith in the New Testament “By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones” (Heb. 11:22). “Joseph’s faith is in a future for the people of God beyond their present circumstances. Egypt is a temporary dwelling, not a home.”<sup>28</sup>

##### **1. A Youngman with Dreams:**

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<sup>26</sup> Wesley L. Duewel, *Mighty Prevailing Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1990), 214-215.

<sup>27</sup> Reimer, *Pathways to the King: Living a Life of Spiritual Renewal and Power*, 152.

<sup>28</sup> V. P. Hamilton “Joseph” ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D.A. Varson, and Graeme Goldsworthy, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 607.

In their brothers' eyes, Joseph was not a lovely character; he always brought bad reports about his brothers to Jacob (Gen. 37:2). Job loved Joseph more than his other sons "Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he had been born to him in his old age" (Gen. 37:3a). To depict his preferential love for Joseph, Jacob made a richly ornamented robe only for Joseph (Gen. 37:3b), which ignited the jealous fire among the brothers. When Joseph was seventeen years old, young and unwise, he told his family God had given him two dreams of destiny. In the first dream, the sheaves of his brothers bowed before his sheaves (Gen. 37:5-7). In the second dream, the sun and moon, and eleven stars all bowed before him (Gen. 37:9). These dreams ended with the picture of his brothers bowing down to him, depicting Joseph as a ruler while his brothers as his servants (Gen. 37:7 and 9). "God has a plan for this young man's life, and that plan includes some type of leadership."<sup>29</sup> His brothers, of course, were not excited about Joseph's prophetic dreams. They were driven from jealousy to hatred and planned to kill Joseph. Finally, they sold him to Ishmaelites (Gen. 37:28), and later Joseph was trafficked to Egypt as a slave.

## **2. Unsavory Experience Establishes Perseverance Faith**

"How does God encourage a person amid the most forbidding circumstances?"<sup>30</sup> God showed his grace to Joseph by making him wise and lovable. Although in miserable situations, Joseph did not take offense at God. From Gen. 39:2a, we know that "The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered." With God's blessing, Joseph rose to a prominent position even as a slave in the house of Potiphar. But Joseph's good fortune only stayed for a short time. Potiphar's wife proposed to have an affair with Joseph, but Joseph refused, "How then could I do such a

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<sup>29</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 130.

<sup>30</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 87.

wicked thing and sin against God?” (Gen. 39:9b). “Previously a victim of jealous and anger, Joseph is about to become a victim of a vicious lie.”<sup>31</sup> Joseph was falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife, and he went to prison unjustly. Despite the suffering, Joseph did not take offense at God and had faith in the dreams which God foretold he would be a ruler. From Gen. 39, we know that “Joseph is guilty of no egregious sin. In fact, he is the one person in Genesis who flees from sin.”<sup>32</sup> His faith became more mature as he grew in Egypt.

“The LORD was with him; He showed him kindness and granted favor in the eyes of the prison warden” (Gen. 39:21). With God’s blessing, Joseph rose to a prominence position again, even in prison. After interpreted dreams for the cupbearer and the baker, he asked the cupbearer to remember him and help him reach justice “remember me and show me kindness; mentioned me to the Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon” (Gen. 40:14-15). Though the cupbearer forgot Joseph, God did not. From seventeen to thirty, Joseph experienced a nerve-wracking nightmare in Egypt that lasts for thirteen years. Joseph may be tempted to be angry, bitter, resentful, and doubting God’s promise. Yet, Joseph held onto his faith in God even in his darkest hour and just waited calmly and patiently.

Finally, God prompted Pharaoh with two disturbing dreams, and no one knew how to interpret these dreams. With the help of the cupbearer, Pharaoh called for Joseph to interpret his dreams. Joseph interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams wisely and suggested ways to solve the foretold disaster satisfactorily. Pharaoh then pronounced that “Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you” (Gen. 41:39). Amen, even a gentile king knew God is with Joseph. Immediately Pharaoh gave Joseph a prominent position as the second in

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<sup>31</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 131.

<sup>32</sup> Hamilton “Joseph” ed., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 606.

command (ruler) in charge of the whole land of Egypt (Gen. 41:41). Eventually, after a series of remarkable events, his brothers did bow down to Joseph as foretold in his dreams

Joseph might be tempted to abandon God's way altogether during tragic circumstances, but with perseverance faith in God, he lived in integrity throughout his life. "It was in faithfulness to the daily walk with God that he never lost his favor."<sup>33</sup> Joseph's perseverance faith in God teaches us to choose the right attitude during difficulty. When tests come our way, we have to choose the right attitude, rejoice in faith. "We rejoice over what God will accomplish through the difficulty. We rejoice that God can redeem difficulties in our lives and make us more like Jesus."<sup>34</sup> Jas. 1:2, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." Also, in 1 Thes. 5:16-18 and Phil. 4:4-7, Paul reminded us that rejoicing, praising, and giving thanks were critical to our faith, especially during times of hardship or trial.

### **3. In All Things God Works for Good:**

Joseph's life took many crazy turns, but God continued to show him grace Gen. 50:20. When the famine had spread over the world (Gen. 42:57) as per the Pharaoh's dream, Joseph's brothers have to come to Egypt to buy grain to feed their family back in Canaan. Joseph then realized that God sent him to Egypt to save lives (Gen. 45:5), including Hebrew and Egyptian. God is faithful, and He was not primarily concerned about Joseph's wellbeing. He is also concerned about his promises to Abraham. "God was willing to afflict Joseph to make him more aware of whom he was intended to be - a rescued bearer of loving-kindness."<sup>35</sup> Joseph concluded

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<sup>33</sup> Davis, *Jonah and Me: on Mission with God*, 139.

<sup>34</sup> Reimer, *Pathways to the King: Living a Life of Spiritual Renewal and Power*, 149.

<sup>35</sup> Davis, *Jonah and Me: on Mission with God*, 78-79.

his life experience in Gen. 50:20: “you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” Joseph affirms his belief in the providential plan of God for his life in Gen. 45:6-8 and 50:19-20. He proclaimed that “God sent me” (Gen. 45:7), and “God intended it for good” (Gen. 50:20). In favor of God, “Joseph regards the action of God within the destructive, sinful behavior of the brothers as decisive.”<sup>36</sup> This perspective frees Joseph from succumbing to anger, resentment, and bitterness.

Humans tend to avoid suffering and miserable situations. However, sometimes through suffering, we cooperate with God in His eternal plan to bring healing to the broken parts of His creation. “God is Sovereign in His love and His good intention for us. He has a way of redeeming suffering and working good from an apparently evil situation.”<sup>37</sup> We always forget that God’s blessing is unlimited. we refrain from sharing it with others, fearing doing so will leave us with less. “We forget that God disperses blessing to us so that we may share with others, that He blesses us so that we will be a blessing to others.”<sup>38</sup>

“We may fall into anger, grumbling, and complaining. But this response is an accusation against God. When we choose to rejoice instead, we remember that God is good all the time. In our rejoicing, we proclaim that God is loving. He is trustworthy.”<sup>39</sup> Committing yourself to the faithful hands of the Creator means you can surrender your life into God’s trustworthy hands. “So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good” (1 Peter 4:19). You can trust your loving Abba Father completely. “He is for you and not against you.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> V. P. Hamilton “Joseph” ed., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 607.

<sup>37</sup> Davis, *Jonah and Me: on Mission with God*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Davis, *Jonah and Me: on Mission with God*, 9

<sup>39</sup> Reimer, *Pathways to the King: Living a Life of Spiritual Renewal and Power*, 149.

<sup>40</sup> Reimer, *Pathways to the King: Living a Life of Spiritual Renewal and Power*, 161.

## V. Conclusion

The stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph and their covenant with God influenced early church's thinking regarding Jesus Christ's mission to the world. "Paul argues that the divine promises made to Abraham find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ."<sup>41</sup> He stresses that Abraham is the father of those who have faith, whether they are his natural descendant or not (cf. Rom. 9:6-8). Paul further concludes that both Jews and Gentile can be justified by faith with Jesus Christ. Paul's theology of salvation is based on the biblical understanding of righteousness by faith, simple trust in the promises of God in the covenant made with Abraham and achieved in the Messiah Jesus. Abraham's belief on this occasion became the basis for Paul pinpointing New Testament believers (both Jew and Gentile) as children of Abraham.

God's acceptance is offered freely to all who have faith in Jesus Christ. Most importantly, the covenant established between God and Abraham was based on mutual commitment. "Each party was considered righteous, since in the covenantal understanding, righteousness is the status of one who is faithful to his or her part of a relationship."<sup>42</sup> Therefore, it is concluded that all who exhibit similar faith are Abraham's children and share in the blessing associated with the divine promises made to Abraham.

Jesus stresses that Abraham's children will resemble him (Jn. 8:39), and Paul argues that the true children of Abraham are those who share the faith of Abraham (Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:7). "Within the New Testament, especially in Romans, Galatians, Hebrews, and James, the most noteworthy aspect of Abraham's life is his faith."<sup>43</sup> "Paul emphasized the necessity of becoming

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<sup>41</sup> Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land-An introduction to the Pentateuch*, 155.

<sup>42</sup> Ray, *Abraham: The Tests of Faith*, eBook, Ch. 5.

<sup>43</sup> Alexander "Abraham (Abram)" ed., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 370.

righteous through faith, and he argues that the righteousness by which an individual is justified comes from God through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21-22).

James also discussed Abraham's faith in James 2:20-24 "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" (Jam. 2:14) At the heart of James' discussion is Abraham's faith in God which exhibit in his righteous actions, particularly the offering of Isaac on the Alter. James admits that Abraham was justified by faith, but he views his offering of his only son on the Alter as an expression of his inner faith. Abraham was justified by a faith that works. "Undoubtedly, James focuses on Genesis 22 because of the way in which Abraham is rewarded for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. For James there can be no separation of faith and deeds."<sup>44</sup>

Although James writes that "a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone" (Jas. 2:24), he does not contradict what Paul says in Roman and Galatians. They are addressing different aspects of Abraham's faith. James is concerned to show that Abraham's faith produced righteous actions. "Paul, on the other hands, gives more of an overview of Abraham's odyssey (Heb. 11:8-22) convinced in advance of a resurrection for the son."<sup>45</sup>

Paul claimed in Rom. 2, those who were supposed to be faithful had also gone wrong, so the whole world was in trouble, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). God's answer was to send his only Son, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, to redeem us from our sin. In sending his Son, God is righteous by being faithful to his covenant word. "Therefore, whoever has faith in Jesus is righteous in a covenantal sense because that is the covenant partner's commitment to the relationship."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Alexander "Abraham (Abram)" ed., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 372.

<sup>45</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 112.

<sup>46</sup> Ray, *Abraham: The Tests of Faith*, eBook, Ch. 5.

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