

Genesis 15:1-21

by John Calvin

God promises Abram a great people, equal in number to the stars, and makes a covenant with him to give him the land.

Topics: "Faith Alone", "Covenant Theology"

Description

John Calvin preaches about the faith and obedience of Abram in response to God's promises and commands. Despite his doubts and questions, Abram's faith is counted as righteousness by God, showing that justification comes through faith alone. God reassures Abram of his future descendants and the possession of the promised land, even though it will take time and involve hardships. The vision of the smoking furnace and burning lamp symbolizes the future deliverance and light that will emerge from darkness for Abram's seed. The covenant made with Abram signifies God's faithfulness and the assurance of his promises.

Transcript

1. After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.
1. Post haec fuit verbum Jehovahae ad Abram in visione, dicendo, Ne timeas Abram, ego scutum ero tibi, merces tua multa valde.
2. And Abram said, Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus?
2. Et dixit Abram, Dominator Jehova, quid dabis mihi? Et ego incedo orbus, et filius derelictionis domus meae erit iste Damascenus Elihezer.
3. And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir.
3. Et dixit Abram, Ecce, mihi non dedisti semen: et ecce, filius domus meae haeres meus est.
4. And, behold, the word of the LORD came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir.

4. Et ecce verbum Jehovae ad eum, dicendo, Non erit haeres tuus iste, sed qui egredietur de visceribus tuis, ipse haeres tuus erit.

5. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.

5. Et eduxit eum foras, et dixit, Suspice nunc coelum, et numera stellas, si poteris numerare eas. Et dixit ei, Sic erit semen tuum.

6. And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.

6. Et credidit Jehovae, et reputavit illud ei ad justitiam.

7. And he said unto him, I am the LORD that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it.

7. Et dixit ad eum, Ego Jehova qui eduxi te de Ur Chaldaeae, ut darem tibi terram istam, ut haeredites eam.

8. And he said, Lord GOD, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?

8. Et dixit, Dominator Jehova, in quo cognoscam quod haereditabo eam?

9. And he said unto him, Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.

9. Et dixit ad eum, Tolle mihi vitulam triennem, et capram triennem, et arietem triennem, et turturem, et pullum columbarum.

10. And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not.

10. Et tulit sibi omnia ista, et divisit ea per medium, et posuit quamlibet partem divisionis suae e regione sociae suae; sed aves non divisit.

11. And when the fowls came down upon the carcases, Abram drove them away.

11. Et descenderunt aves super cadavera, et abigebat eas Abram.

12. And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him.

12. Et fuit, sole occumbente sopor cecidit super Abram: et ecce, terror tenebrosus et magnus cadens super eum.

13. And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years;

13. Et dixit ad Abram, Cognoscendo cognosce quod peregrinum erit semen tuum in terra non sua: et servient eis, affligentque eos per quadringentos annos.

14. And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance.

14. Sed etiam gentem cui servierint, ego judicabo, et postea egredientur cum substantia magna.

15. And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age.

15. Et tu ingredieris ad patres tuos in pace, sepelieris in canitie bona.

16. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.

16. Et generatione quarta revertentur huc: quia nondum est completa iniquitas Emoraei.

17. And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces.

17. Et fuit, sole occumbente caligo erat, et ecce furnus fumans, et lampas ignis quae transibat inter divisiones ipsas.

18. In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates:

18. In die ipso pepigit, Jehova cum Abram foedus dicendo, Semini tuo dabo terram hanc a flumine Aegypti, usque ad flumen magnum, flumen Euphratem:

19. The Kenites, and the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites,

19. Ceneum, et Cenizaeum, et Cadmonaeum,

20. And the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaims,

20. Et Hitthaeum, et Perizaeum, et Rephaim,

21. And the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.

21. Et Emoraeum, et Chenaanaeum, et Girgasaeum, et Jebusaeum.

1. The word of the Lord came . When Abram's affairs were prosperous and were proceeding according to his wish, this vision might seem to be superfluous; especially since the Lord commands his servant, as one sorrowful and afflicted with fear, to be of good courage. Therefore certain writers conjecture, that Abram having returned after the deliverance of his nephew, was subjected to some annoyance of which no mention is made by Moses; just as the Lord often humbles his people, lest they should exult in their prosperity; and they further suppose that when Abram had been dejected he was again revived by a new oracle.

But since there is no warrant for such conjecture in the words of Moses, I think the cause was different. First, although he was on all sides applauded, it is not to be doubted that various surmises entered into his own mind. For, notwithstanding Chedorlaomer and his allies had been overcome in battle, yet Abram had so provoked them, that they might with fresh troops, and with renewed strength, again attack the land of Canaan. Nor were the inhabitants of the land free from the fear of this danger.

Secondly, as signal success commonly draws its companion envy along with it, Abram began to be exposed to many disadvantageous remarks, after he had dared to enter into conflict with an army which had conquered four kings. An unfavourable suspicion might also arise, that perhaps, by and by, he would

turn the strength which he had tried against foreign kings, upon his neighbors, and upon those who had hospitably received him. Therefore, as the victory was an honor to him, so it cannot be doubted, that it rendered him formidable and an object of suspicion to many, while it inflamed the hatred of others; since every one would imagine some danger to himself, from his bravery and good success.

It is therefore not strange, that he should have been troubled, and should anxiously have revolved many things, until God animated him anew, by the confident expectation of his assistance. There might be also another end to be answered by the oracle; namely, that God would meet and correct a contrary fault in his servant. For it was possible that Abram might be so elated with victory as to forget his own calling, and to seek the acquisition of dominion for himself, as one who, wearied with a wandering course of life and with perpetual vexations, desired a better fortune, and a quiet state of existence.

And we know how liable men are to be ensnared by the blandishments of prosperous and smiling fortune. Therefore God anticipates the danger; and before this vanity takes possession of the mind of the holy man, recalls to his memory the spiritual grace vouchsafed to him to the end that he, entirely acquiescing therein, may despise all other things. Yet because this expression, Fear not, sounds as if God would soothe his sorrowing and anxious servant with some consolation; it is probable that he had need of such confirmation, because he perceived that many malignantly stormed against his victory, and that his old age would be exposed to severe annoyances.

It might however be, that God did not forbid him to fear, because he was already afraid; but that he might learn courageously to despise, and to account as nothing, all the favor of the world, and all earthly wealth; as if he had said, 'If only I am propitious to thee, there is no reason why thou shouldst fear; contented with me alone in the world, pursue, as thou hast begun, thy pilgrimage; and rather depend on heaven, than attach thyself to earth.' However this might be, God recalls his servant to himself, showing that far greater blessings were treasured up for him in God; in order that Abram might not rest satisfied with his victory.

Moses says that God spoke to him in a vision, by which he intimates that some visible symbol of God's glory was added to the word, in order that greater authority might be given to the oracle. And this was one of two ordinary methods by which the Lord was formerly wont to manifest himself to his prophets, as it is stated in the book of Numbers, (Ge 12:6.)

Fear not, Abram. Although the promise comes last in the text, it yet has precedence in order; because on it depends the confirmation, by which God frees the heart of Abram from fear. God exhorts Abram to be of a tranquil mind; but what foundation is there for such security, unless by faith we understand that God cares for us, and learn to rest in his providence? The promise, therefore, that God will be Abram's shield and his exceeding great reward, holds the first place; to which is added the exhortation, that, relying upon such a guardian of his safety, and such an author of his felicity, he should not fear.

Therefore, to make the sense of the words more clear, the causal particle is to be inserted. 'Fear not, Abram, because I am thy shield.' Moreover, by the use of the word "shield," he signifies that Abram would always be safe under his protection. In calling himself his "reward," He teaches Abram to be satisfied with Himself alone. And as this was, with respect to Abram, a general instruction, given for the purpose of showing him that victory was not the chief and ultimate good which God had designed him to pursue; so let us know that the same blessing is promised to us all, in the person of this one man.

For, by this voice, God daily speaks to his faithful ones; inasmuch as having once undertaken to defend us, he will take care to preserve us in safety under his hand, and to protect us by his power. Now since

God ascribes to himself the office and property of a shield, for the purpose of rendering himself the protector of our salvation; we ought to regard this promise as a brazen wall, so that we should not be excessively fearful in any dangers. And since men, surrounded with various and innumerable desires of the flesh, are at times unstable, and are then too much addicted to the love of the present life; the other member of the sentence follows, in which God declares, that he alone is sufficient for the perfection of a happy life to the faithful.

For the word "reward" has the force of inheritance, or felicity . Were it deeply engraven on our minds, that in God alone we have the highest and complete perfection of all good things; we should easily fix bounds to those wicked desires by which we are miserably tormented. The meaning then of the passage is this, that we shall be truly happy when God is propitious to us; for he not only pours upon us the abundance of his kindness, but offers himself to us, that we may enjoy him.

Now what is there more, which men can desire, when they really enjoy God? David knew the force of this promise, when he boasted that he had obtained a goodly lot, because the Lord was his inheritance, (Ps 16:6.) But since nothing is more difficult than to curb the depraved appetites of the flesh, and since the ingratitude of man is so vile and impious, that God scarcely ever satisfies them; the Lord calls himself not simply "a reward," but an exceeding great reward, with which we ought to be more than sufficiently contented.

This truly furnishes most abundant material, and most solid support, for confidence. For whosoever shall be fully persuaded that his life is protected by the hand of God, and that he never can be miserable while God is gracious to him; and who consequently resorts to this haven in all his cares and troubles, will find the best remedy for all evils. Not that the faithful can be entirely free from fear and care, as long as they are tossed by the tempests of contentions and of miseries; but because the storm is hushed in their own breast; and whereas the defense of God is greater than all dangers, so faith triumphs over fear.

2. And Abram said , Lord God . The Hebrew text has **יהוה אלהי** (Adonai Jehovah .) From which appellation it is inferred that some special mark of divine glory was stamped upon the vision; so that Abram, having no doubt respecting its author, confidently broke out in this expression. For since Satan is a wonderful adept at deceiving, and deludes men with so many wiles in the name of God, it was necessary that some sure and notable distinction should appear in true and heavenly oracles, which would not suffer the faith and the minds of the holy fathers to waver. Therefore in the vision of which mention is made, the majesty of the God of Abram was manifested, which would suffice for the confirmation of his faith. Not that God appeared as he really is, but only so far as he might be comprehended by the human mind. But Abram, in overlooking a promise so glorious, in complaining that he is childless, and in murmuring against God, for having hitherto given him no seed, seems to conduct himself with little modesty. What was more desirable than to be received under God's protection, and to be happy in the enjoyment of Him? The objection, therefore, which Abram raised, when disparaging the incomparable benefit offered to him, and refusing to rest contented until he receives offspring, appears to be wanting in reverence. Yet the liberty which he took admits of excuse; first, because the Lord permits us to pour into his bosom those cares by which we are tormented, and those troubles with which we are oppressed. Secondly, the design of the complaint is to be considered; for he does not simply declare that he is solitary, but, seeing that the effect of all the promises depended upon his seed, he does, not improperly, require that a pledge so necessary should be given him. For if the benediction and salvation of the world was not to be hoped for except through his seed; when that principal point seemed to fail him, it is not to be wondered at, that other things should seem to vanish from his sight, or should at least not appease his mind, nor satisfy his wishes. And

this is the very reason why God not only regards with favor the complaint of his servant, but immediately gives a propitious answer to his prayer. Moses indeed ascribes to Abram that affection which is naturally inherent in us all; but this is no proof that Abram did not look higher when he so earnestly desired to be the progenitor of an heir. And certainly these promises had not faded from his recollection; 'To thy seed will I give this land,' and 'In thy seed shall all nations be blessed;' the former of which promises is so annexed to all the rest, that if it be taken away, all confidence in them would perish; while the latter promise contains in it the whole gratuitous pledge of salvation. Therefore Abram rightly includes in it, every thing which God had promised.

I go childless . The language is metaphorical. We know that our life is like a race. Abram, seeing he was of advanced age, says that he has so far proceeded, that little of his course still remains. 'Now,' he says, 'I am come near the goal; and the course of my life being finished, I shall die childless.' He adds, for the sake of aggravating the indignity, 'that a foreigner would be his heir.' For I do not doubt that Damascus is the name of his country , and not the proper name of his mother , as some falsely suppose; as if he had said, 'Not one of my own relatives will be my heir, but a Syrian from Damascus.' For, perhaps, Abram had bought him in Mesopotamia. He also calls him the son of מֶשֶׁק (mesek ,) concerning the meaning of which word grammarians are not agreed. Some derive it from שָׁקַק (shakak ,) which means to run to and fro, and translate it, steward or superintendent , because he who sustains the care of a large house, runs hither and thither in attending to his business. Others derive it from שֹׁקֵק (shook ,) and render it cup-bearer , which seems to me incongruous. I rather adopt a different translation, namely, that he was called the son of the deserted house, (filius derelictionis 370), because מַשָּׁק mashak sometimes signifies to leave . Yet I do not conceive him to be so called because Abram was about to leave all things to him; but because Abram himself had no hope left in any other. It is therefore (in my judgment) just as if he called him the son of a house destitute of children, 371 because this was a proof of a deserted and barren house, that the inheritance was devolving upon a foreigner who would occupy the empty and deserted place. He afterwards contemptuously calls him his servant, or his home-born slave, 'the son of my house (he says) will be my heir.' He thus speaks in contempt, as if he would say, 'My condition is wretched, who shall not have even a freeman for my successor.' It is however asked, how he could be both a Damascene and a home-born slave of Abram? There are two solutions of the difficulty, either that he was called the son of the house, not because he was born , but only because he was educated in it; or, that he sprang from Damascus, because his father was from Syria.

4. This shall not be thine heir . We hence infer that God had approved the wish of Abram. Whence also follows the other point, that Abram had not been impelled by any carnal affection to offer up this prayer, but by a pious and holy desire of enjoying the benediction promised to him. For God not only promises him a seed, but a great people, who in number should equal the stars of heaven. They who expound the passage allegorically; implying that a heavenly seed was promised him which might be compared with the stars, may enjoy their own opinion: but we maintain what is more solid; namely, that the faith of Abram was increased by the sight of the stars. For the Lord, in order more deeply to affect his own people, and more efficaciously to penetrate their minds, after he here reached their ears by his word, also arrests their eyes by external symbols, that eyes and ears may consent together. Therefore the sight of the stars was not superfluous; but God intended to strike the mind of Abram with this thought, 'He who by his word alone suddenly produced a host so numerous by which he might adorn the previously vast and desolate heaven; shall not He be able to replenish my desolate house with offspring?' It is, however, not necessary to imagine a nocturnal vision, because the stars, which, during the day, escape our sight, would then appear; for since the whole was transacted in vision, Abram had a wonderful scene set before him, which would

manifestly reveal hidden things to him. Therefore though he perhaps might not move a step, it was yet possible for him in vision to be led forth out of his tent. The question now occurs, concerning what seed the promise is to be understood. And it is certain that neither the posterity of Ishmael nor of Esau is to be taken into this account, because the legitimate seed is to be reckoned by the promise, which God determined should remain in Isaac and Jacob; yet the same doubt arises respecting the posterity of Jacob, because many who could trace their descent from him, according to the flesh, cut themselves off, as degenerate sons and aliens, from the faith of their fathers. I answer, that this term seed is, indiscriminately, extended to the whole people whole God has adopted to himself. But since many were alienated by their unbelief, we must come for information to Christ, who alone distinguishes true and genuine sons from such as are illegitimate. By pursuing this method, we find the posterity of Abram reduced to a small numbers that afterwards it may be the more increased. For in Christ the Gentiles also are gathered together, and are by faith ingrafted into the body of Abram, so as to have a place among his legitimate sons. Concerning which point more will be said in the seventeenth chapter Ge 17:1

6. And he believed in the Lord . None of us would be able to conceive the rich and hidden doctrine which this passage contains, unless Paul had borne his torch before us. (Ro 4:3.) But it is strange, and seems like a prodigy, that when the Spirit of God has kindled so great a light, yet the greater part of interpreters wander with closed eyes, as in the darkness of night. I omit the Jews, whose blindness is well known. But it is (as I have said) monstrous, that they who have had Paul as their luminous expositor; should so foolishly have depraved this place.

However it hence appears, that in all ages, Satan has labored at nothing more assiduously than to extinguish, or to smother, the gratuitous justification of faith, which is here expressly asserted. The words of Moses are, "He believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness." In the first place, the faith of Abram is commended, because by it he embraced the promise of God; it is commended, in the second place, because hence Abram obtained righteousness in the sight of God, and that by imputation.

For the word ■■■■ (chashab ,) which Moses uses, is to be understood as relating to the judgment of God, just as in Ps 106:31, where the zeal of Phinehas is said to have been counted to him for righteousness. The meaning of the expression will, however, more fully appear by comparison with its opposites. 372 In Le 7:18, it is said that when expiation has been made, iniquity 'shall not be imputed' to a man. Again, in Le 17:4, 'Blood shall be imputed unto that man.' So, in 2Sa 19:19, Shimei says, 'Let not the king impute iniquity unto me.'

Nearly of the same import is the expression in 2Ki 12:15, 'They reckoned not with the man into whose hand they delivered the money for the work;' that is, they required no account of the money, but suffered them to administer it, in perfect confidence. Let us now return to Moses. Just as we understand that they to whom iniquity is imputed are guilty before God; so those to whom he imputes righteousness are approved by him as just persons; wherefore Abram was received into the number and rank of just persons by the imputation of righteousness.

For Paul, in order that he may show us distinctly the force and nature, or quality of this righteousness, leads us to the celestial tribunal of God. Therefore, they foolishly trifle who apply this term to his character as an honest man; 373 as if it meant that Abram was personally held to be a just and righteous man. They also, no less unskilfully, corrupt the text, who say that Abram is here ascribing to God the glory of righteousness seeing that he ventures to acquiesce surely in His promises, acknowledging Him to be faithful and true; for although Moses does not expressly mention the name of God, yet the accustomed

method of speaking in the Scriptures removes all ambiguity.

Lastly, it is not less the part of stupor than of impudence, when this faith is said to have been imputed to him for righteousness, to mingle with it some other meaning, than that the faith of Abram was accepted in the place of righteousness with God.

It seems, however, to be absurd, that Abram should be justified by believing that his seed would be as numerous as the stars of heaven; for this could be nothing but a particular faith, which would by no means suffice for the complete righteousness of man. Besides, what could an earthly and temporal promise avail for eternal salvation? I answer, first, that the believing of which Moses speaks, is not to be restricted to a single clause of the promise here referred to, but embraces the whole; secondly that Abram did not form his estimate of the promised seed from this oracle alone, but also from others, where a special benediction is added.

Whence we infer that he did not expect some common or undefined seed, but that in which the world was to be blessed. Should any one pertinaciously insist, that what is said in common of all the children of Abram, is forcibly distorted when applied to Christ; in the first place, it cannot be denied that God now again repeats the promise before made to his servant, for the purpose of answering his complaint. But we have said -- and the thing itself clearly proves -- that Abram was impelled thus greatly to desire seed, by a regard to the promised benediction.

Whence it follows, that this promise was not taken by him separately from others. But to pass all this over; we must, I say, consider what is here treated of, in order to form a judgment of the faith of Abram. God does not promise to his servant this or the other thing only, as he sometimes grants special benefits to unbelievers, who are without the taste of his paternal love; but he declares, that He will be propitious to him, and confirms him in the confidence of safety, by relying upon His protection and His grace.

For he who has God for his inheritance does not exult in fading joy; but, as one already elevated towards heaven, enjoys the solid happiness of eternal life. It is, indeed, to be maintained as an axiom, that all the promises of God, made to the faithful, flow from the free mercy of God, and are evidences of that paternal love, and of that gratuitous adoption, on which their salvation is founded. Therefore, we do not say that Abram was justified because he laid hold on a single word, respecting the offspring to be brought forth, but because he embraced God as his Father.

And truly faith does not justify us for any other reason, than that it reconciles us unto God; and that it does so, not by its own merit; but because we receive the grace offered to us in the promises, and have no doubt of eternal life, being fully persuaded that we are loved by God as sons. Therefore, Paul reasons from contraries, that he to whom faith is imputed for righteousness, has not been justified by works. (Ro 4:4.) For whosoever obtains righteousness by works, his merits come into the account before God.

But we apprehend righteousness by faith, when God freely reconciles us to himself. Whence it follows, that the merit of works ceases when righteousness is sought by faith; for it is necessary that this righteousness should be freely given by God, and offered in his word, in order that any one may possess it by faith. To render this more intelligible, when Moses says that faith was imputed to Abram for righteousness, he does not mean that faith was that first cause of righteousness which is called the efficient, but only the formal cause; as if he had said, that Abram was therefore justified, because, relying on the paternal loving-kindness of God, he trusted to His mere goodness, and not to himself, nor to his own merits.

For it is especially to be observed, that faith borrows a righteousness elsewhere, of which we, in ourselves, are destitute; otherwise it would be in vain for Paul to set faith in opposition to works, when speaking of the mode of obtaining righteousness. Besides, the mutual relation between the free promise and faith, leaves no doubt upon the subject.

We must now notice the circumstance of time. Abram was justified by faith many years after he had been called by God; after he had left his country a voluntary exile, rendering himself a remarkable example of patience and of continence; after he had entirely dedicated himself to sanctity and after he had, by exercising himself in the spiritual and external service of God, aspired to a life almost angelical. It therefore follows, that even to the end of life, we are led towards the eternal kingdom of God by the righteousness of faith.

On which point many are too grossly deceived. For they grant, indeed, that the righteousness which is freely bestowed upon sinners and offered to the unworthy is received by faith alone; but they restrict this to a moment of time, so that he who at the first obtained justification by faith, may afterwards be justified by good works. By this method, faith is nothing else than the beginning of righteousness, whereas righteousness itself consists in a continual course of works.

But they who thus trifle must be altogether insane. For if the angelical uprightness of Abram faithfully cultivated through so many years, in one uniform course, did not prevent him from fleeing to faith, for the sake of obtaining righteousness; where upon earth besides will such perfection be found, as may stand in God's sight? Therefore, by a consideration of the time in which this was said to Abram, 374 we certainly gather, that the righteousness of works is not to be substituted for the righteousness of faith, in any such way, that one should perfect what the other has begun; but that holy men are only justified by faith, as long as they live in the world.

If any one object, that Abram previously believed God, when he followed Him at His call, and committed himself to His direction and guardianship, the solution is ready; that we are not here told when Abram first began to be justified, or to believe in God; but that in this one place it is declared, or related, how he had been justified through his whole life. For if Moses had spoken thus immediately on Abram's first vocation, the cavil of which I have spoken would have been more specious; namely, that the righteousness of faith was only initial (so to speak) and not perpetual.

But now since after such great progress, he is still said to be justified by faith, it thence easily appears that the saints are justified freely even unto death. I confess, indeed, that after the faithful are born again by the Spirit of God, the method of justifying differs, in some respect, from the former. For God reconciles to himself those who are born only of the flesh, and who are destitute of all good; and since he finds nothing in them except a dreadful mass of evils, he counts them just, by imputation.

But those to whom he has imparted the Spirit of holiness and righteousness, he embraces with his gifts. Nevertheless, in order that their good works may please God, it is necessary that these works themselves should be justified by gratuitous imputation; but some evil is always inherent in them. Meanwhile, however, this is a settled point, that men are justified before God by believing not by working; while they obtain grace by faith, because they are unable to deserve a reward by works.

Paul also, in hence contending, that Abram did not merit by works the righteousness which he had received before his circumcision, does not impugn the above doctrine. The argument of Paul is of this kind: The circumcision of Abram was posterior to his justification in the order of time, and therefore could

not be its cause, for of necessity the cause precedes its effect. I also grant, that Paul, for this reason, contends that works are not meritorious, except under the covenant of the law, of which covenant, circumcision is put as the earnest and the symbol.

But since Paul is not here defining the force and nature of circumcision, regarded as a pure and genuine institution of God, but is rather disputing on the sense attached to it, by those with whom he deals, he therefore does not allude to the covenant which God before had made with Abram, because the mention of it was unnecessary for the present purpose. Both arguments are therefore of force; first, that the righteousness of Abram cannot be ascribed to the covenant of the law, because it preceded his circumcision; and, secondly, that the righteousness even of the most perfect characters perpetually consists in faith; since Abram, with all the excellency of his virtues, after his daily and even remarkable service of God, was, nevertheless, justified by faith.

For this also is, in the last place, worthy of observation, that what is here related concerning one man, is applicable to all the sons of God. For since he was called the father of the faithful, not without reason; and since further, there is but one method of obtaining salvation; Paul properly teaches, that a real and not personal righteousness is in this place described.

7. I am the Lord that brought thee. Since it greatly concerns us, to have God as the guide of our whole life, in order that we may know that we have not rashly entered on some doubtful way, therefore the Lord confirms Abram in the course of his vocation, and recalls to his memory the original benefit of his deliverance; as if he had said, 'I, after I had stretched out my hand to thee, to lead thee forth from the labyrinth of death, have carried my favor towards thee thus far. Thou, therefore, respond to me in turn, by constantly advancing; and maintain steadfastly thy faith, from the beginning even to the end.' This indeed is said, not with respect to Abram alone, in order that he, gathering together the promises of God, made to him from the very commencement of his life of faith, should form them into one whole; 375 but that all the pious may learn to regard the beginning of their vocation as flowing perpetually from Abram, their common father; and may thus securely boast with Paul, that they know in whom they have believed, (2Ti 1:12,) and that God, who, in the person of Abram, had separated a church unto himself; would be a faithful keeper of the salvation deposited with Him. That, for this very end, the Lord declares himself to have been the deliverer of Abram appears hence; because he connects the promise which he is now about to give with the prior redemption; as if he were saying, 'I do not now first begin to promise thee this land. For it was on this account that I brought thee out of thy own country, to constitute thee the lord and heir of this land. Now therefore I covenant with thee in the same form; lest thou shouldst deem thyself to have been deceived, or fed with empty words; and I command thee to be mindful of the first covenant, that the new promise, which after many years I now repeat, may be the more firmly supported.'

8. Lord God, whereby shall I know. It may appear absurd, first, that Abram, who before had placed confidence in the simple word of God, without moving any question concerning the promises given to him, should now dispute whether what he hears from the mouth of God be true or not. Secondly, that he ascribes but little honor to God, not merely by murmuring against him, when he speaks, but by requiring some additional pledge to be given him. Further, whence arises the knowledge which belongs to faith, but from the word? Therefore Abram in vain desires to be assured of the future possession of the land, while he ceases to depend upon the word of God. I answer, the Lord sometimes concedes to his children, that they may freely express any objection which comes into their mind. For he does not act so strictly with them, as not to suffer himself to be questioned. Yea, the more certainly Abram was persuaded that God was true, and the more he was attached to His word, so much the more familiarly did he disburden his

cares into God's bosom. To this may be added, that the protracted delay was no small obstacle to Abram's faith. For after God had held him in suspense through a great part of his life, now when he was worn down with age, and had nothing before his eyes but death and the grave, God anew declares that he shall be lord of the land. He does not, however, reject, on account of its difficulty, what might have appeared to him incredible, but brings before God the anxiety by which he is inwardly oppressed. And therefore his questioning with God is rather a proof of faith, than a sign of incredulity. The wicked, because their minds are entangled with various conflicting thoughts, do not in any way receive the promises, but the pious, who feel the impediments in their flesh, endeavor to remove them, lest they should obstruct the way to God's word; and they seek a remedy for those evils of which they are conscious. It is, nevertheless, to be observed, that there were some special impulses in the saints of old, which it would not now be lawful to draw into a precedent. For though Hezekiah and Gideon required certain miracles, this is not a reason why the same thing should be attempted by us in the present day; let it suffice us to seek for such confirmation only as the Lord himself according to his own pleasure, shall judge most eligible.

9. Take me an heifer of three years old . Some, instead of an heifer of three years old translate the passage, 'three heifers' and in each species of animals enumerated, would make the number three. Yet the opinion of those who apply the word three to the age of the heifer, is more general. Moreover, although God would not deny his servant what he had asked; he yet, by no means, granted what would gratify the desire of the flesh. For, what certainty could be added to the promise, by the slaughter of an heifer, or goat, or ram? For the true design of sacrifice, of which we shall see more presently, was hitherto hidden from Abram. Therefore by obeying the command of God, of which, however, no advantage was apparent, he hence proves the obedience of his faith; nor did his wish aim at any other end than this; namely, that the obstacle being removed, he might, as was just, reverently acquiesce in the word of the Lord. Let us, therefore, learn meekly to embrace those helps which God offers for the confirmation of our faith; although they may not accord with our judgment, but rather may seem to be a mockery; until, at length, it shall become plain from the effect, that God was as far as possible from mocking us.

10. And divided them in the midst . That no part of this sacrifice may be without mystery, certain interpreters weary themselves in the fabrication of subtleties; but it is our business, as I have often declared, to cultivate sobriety. I confess I do not know why he was commanded to take three kinds of animals besides birds; unless it were, that by this variety itself, it was declared, that all the posterity of Abram, of whatever rank they might be, should be offered up in sacrifice, so that the whole people, and each individual, should constitute one sacrifice.

There are also some things, concerning which, if any one curiously seeks the reason, I shall not be ashamed to acknowledge my ignorance, because I do not choose to wander in uncertain speculations. Moreover, this, in my opinion, is the sum of the whole: That God, in commanding the animals to be killed, shows what will be the future condition of the Church. Abram certainly wished to be assured of the promised inheritance of the land. Now he is taught that it would take its commencement from death; that is that he and his children must die before they should enjoy the dominion over the land.

In commanding the slaughtered animals to be cut in parts, it is probable that he followed the ancient rite in forming covenants whether they were entering into any alliance, or were mustering an army, a practice which also passed over to the Gentiles. Now, the allies or the soldiers passed between the severed parts, that, being enclosed together within the sacrifice, they might be the more sacredly united in one body. That this method was practiced by the Jews, Jeremiah bears witness, (Jer 34:18,) where he introduces God as saying, 'They have violated my covenant, when they cut the calf in two parts, and passed between

the divisions of it, as well the princes of Judas, and the nobles of Jerusalem, and the whole people of the land.'

Nevertheless, there appears to me to have been this special reason for the act referred to; that the Lord would indeed admonish the race of Abram, not only that it should be like a dead carcass, but even like one torn and dissected. For the servitude with which they were oppressed for a time, was more intolerable than simple death; yet because the sacrifice is offered to God, death itself is immediately turned into new life. And this is the reason why Abram, placing the parts of the sacrifice opposite to each other, fits them one to the other, because they were again to be gathered together from their dispersion.

But how difficult is the restoration of the Church and what troubles are involved in it, is shown by the horror with which Abram was seized. We see, therefore, that two things were illustrated; namely, the hard servitude, with which the sons of Abram were to be pressed almost to laceration and destruction; and then their redemption, which was to be the signal pledge of divine adoption; and in the same mirror the general condition of the Church is represented to us, as it is the peculiar province of God to create it out of nothing, and to raise it from death.

11. And when the fowls came down . Although the sacrifice was dedicated to God, yet it was not free from the attack and the violence of birds. So neither are the faithful, after they are received into the protection of God, so covered with his hand, as not to be assailed on every side; since Satan and the world cease not to cause them trouble. Therefore, in order that the sacrifice we have once offered to God may not be violated, but may remain pure and uninjured, contrary assaults must be repulsed, with whatever inconvenience and toil.

12. A deep sleep fell upon Abram . The vision is now mingled with a dream. Thus the Lord here joins those two kinds of communication together, which I have before related from Nu 12:6, where it is said,

'When I appear unto my servants the prophets,

I speak to them in a vision or a dream.'

mention has already been made of a vision: Moses now relates, that a dream was superadded. A horrible darkness intervened, that Abram might know that the dream is not a common one, but that the whole is divinely conducted; it has, nevertheless, a correspondence with the oracle then present, as God immediately afterwards explains in his own words, "Thou shalt surely know that thy seed shall be a stranger," etc. We have elsewhere said, that God was not wont to dazzle the eyes of his people with bare and empty spectres; but that in visions, the principal parts always belonged to the word. Thus here, not a mute apparition is presented to the eyes of Abram, but he is taught by an oracle annexed, what the external and visible symbol meant. It is, however, to be observed, that before one son is given to Abram, he hears that his seed shall be, for a long time, in captivity and slavery. For thus does the Lord deal with his own people; he always makes a beginning from death, so that by quickening the dead, he the more abundantly manifests his power. It was necessary, in part, on Abram's account, that this should have been declared; but the Lord chiefly had regard to his posterity, lest they should faint in their sufferings, of which, however, the Lord had promised a joyful and happy issue; especially since their long continuance would produce great weariness. And three things are, step by step, brought before them; first, that the sons of Abram must wander four hundred years, before they should attain the promised inheritance; secondly, that they should be slaves; thirdly that they were to be inhumanly and tyrannically treated. Wherefore the faith of Abram was admirable and singular, seeing that he acquiesced in an oracle so sorrowful, and felt

assured, that God would be his Deliverer, after his miseries had proceeded to their greatest height.

It is, however, asked, how the number of years here given agrees with the subsequent history? Some begin the computation from the time of his departure out of Charran. But it seems more probable that the intermediate time only is denoted; 376 as if he would say, 'It behoves thy posterity to wait patiently; because I have not decreed to grant what I now promise, until the four hundredth year: yea, up to that very time their servitude will continue.' According to this mode of reckoning, Moses says, (Ex 12:40,) that the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt four hundred and thirty years: while yet, from the sixth chapter (Ge 6:1,) we may easily gather, that not more than two hundred and thirty years, or thereabouts, elapsed from the time that Jacob went down thither, to their deliverance. Where then, shall we find the remaining two hundred years, but by referring to the oracle? Of this matter all doubt is removed by Paul, who (Ga 3:17) reckons the years from the gratuitous covenant of life, to the promulgation of the Law. In short, God does not indicate how long the servitude of the people should be from its commencement to its close, but how long he intended to suspend, or to defer his promise. As to his omitting the thirty years, it is neither a new nor unfrequent thing, where years are not accurately computed, to mention only the larger sums. But we see here, that for the sake of brevity, the whole of that period is divided into four centuries. Therefore, there is no absurdity in omitting the short space of time: this is chiefly to be considered, that the Lord, for the purpose of exercising the patience of his people, suspends his promise more than four centuries.

14. Also that nations whom they serve . A consolation is now subjoined, in which this is the first thing, God testifies that he will be the vindicator of his people. Whence it follows, that he will take upon himself the care of the salvation of those whom he has embraced, and will not suffer them to be harassed by the ungodly and the wicked with impunity. And although he here expressly announces that he will take vengeance on the Egyptians; yet all the enemies of the Church are exposed to the same judgment: even as Moses in his song extends to all ages and nations the threat that the Lord will exact punishment for unjust persecutions. 377

'Vengeance is mine, I, saith he, will repay,'

(De 32:35.)

Therefore, whenever we happen to be treated with inhumanity by tyrants, (which is very usual with the Church,) let this be our consolation, that after our faith shall be sufficiently proved by bearing the cross, God, at whose pleasure we are thus humbled, will himself be the Judge, who will repay to our enemies the due reward of the cruelty which they now exercise. Although they now exult with intoxicated joy, it will at length appear by the event itself, that our miseries are happy ones, but their triumphs wretched; because God, who cares for us, is their adversary. But let us remember that we must give place unto the wrath of God, as Paul exhorts, in order that we may not be hurried headlong to seek revenge. Place also must be given to hope, that it may sustain us when oppressed and groaning under the burden of evils. To judge the nation, means the same thing as to summon it to judgment, in order that God, when he has long reposed in silence, may openly manifest himself as the Judge.

15. And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace . Hitherto the Lord had respect to the posterity of Abram as well as to himself, that the consolation might be common to all; but now he turns his address to Abram alone, because he had need of peculiar confirmation. And the remedy proposed for alleviating his sorrow was, that he should die in peace, after he had attained the utmost limit of old age. The explanation given by some that he should die a natural death, exempt from violence; or an easy death, in which his vital

spirits should spontaneously and naturally fail, and his life itself should fall by its own maturity, without any sense of pain, is, in my opinion, frigid. For Moses wishes to express that Abram should have not only a long, but a placid old age, with a corresponding joyful and peaceful death. The sense therefore is that although through his whole life, Abram was to be deprived of the possession of the land, yet he should not be wanting in the essential materials of quiet and joy, so that having happily finished his life, he should cheerfully depart to his fathers. And certainly death makes the great distinction between the reprobate and the sons of God, whose condition in the present life is commonly one and the same, except that the sons of God have by far the worst of it. Wherefore peace in death ought justly to be regarded as a singular benefit, because it is a proof of that distinction to which I have just alluded. 378 Even profane writers, feeling their way in the dark, have perceived this. Plato, in his book on the Republic, (lib.1) cites a song of Pindar, in which he says, that they who live justly and homily, are attended by a sweet hope, cherishing their hearts and nourishing their old age; which hope chiefly governs the fickle mind of men. Because men, conscious of guilt, must necessarily be miserably harassed by various torments; the Poet, when he asserts that hope is the reward of a good conscience, calls it the nurse of old age. 379 For as young men, while far removed from death, carelessly take their pleasure; 380 the old are admonished by their own weakness, seriously to reflect that they must depart. Now unless the hope of a better life inspires them, nothing remains for them but miserable fears. Finally, as the reprobate indulge themselves during their whole life, and stupidly sleep in their vices, it is necessary that their death should be full of trouble; while the faithful commit their souls into the hand of God without fear and sadness. Whence also Balaam was constrained to break forth in this expression,

'Let my soul die the death of the righteous,'

(Nu 23:10.)

Moreover, since men have not such a desirable close of life in their own power; the Lord, in promising a placid and quiet death to his servant Abram, teaches us that it is his own gift. And we see that even kings, and others who deem themselves happy in this world, are yet agitated in death; because they are visited with secret compunctions for their sins, and look for nothing in death but destruction. But Abram willingly and joyfully went forward to his death, seeing that he had in Isaac a certain pledge of the divine benediction, and knew that a better life was laid up for him in heaven.

16. The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full . The reason here given is deemed absurd, as seeming to imply that the sons of Abram could not otherwise be saved, than by the destruction of others. I answer, that we must with modesty and humility yield to the secret counsel of God. Since he had given that land to the Amorites, to be inhabited by them in perpetuity, he intimates, that he will not, without just cause, transfer the possession of it to others; as if he would say, 'I grant the dominion of this land to thy seed without injury to any one.

The land, at present, is occupied by its lawful possessors, to whom I delivered it. Until, therefore, they shall have deserved, by their sins, to be rightfully expelled, the dominion of it still not come to thy posterity.' Thus God teaches him that the land must be evacuated, in order that it may lie open to new inhabitants. And this passage is remarkable, as showing, that the abodes of men are so distributed in the world, that the Lord will preserve quiet people, each in their several stations, till they cast themselves out by their own wickedness.

For by polluting the place of their habitation, they in a certain sense tear away the boundaries fixed by the hand of God, which would otherwise have remained immovable. Moreover, the Lord here commends his own longsuffering. Even then the Amorites had become unworthy to occupy the land, yet the Lord not only bore with them for a short time, but granted them four centuries for repentance. And hence it appears, that he does not, without reason, so frequently declare how slow he is to anger.

But the more graciously he waits for men, if, at length, instead of repenting they remain obstinate, the more severely does he avenge such great ingratitude. Therefore Paul says, that they who indulge themselves in sin, while the goodness and clemency of God invite them to repentance, heap up for themselves a treasure of wrath, (Ro 2:4;) and thus they reap no advantage from delay, seeing that the severity of the punishment is doubled; just as it happened to the Amorites, whom, at length, the Lord commanded to be so entirely cut off, that not even infants were spared.

Therefore when we hear that God out of heaven is silently waiting until iniquities shall fill up their measure; let us know, that this is no time for torpor, but rather let every one of us stir himself up, that we may be beforehand with the celestial judgment. It was formerly said by a heathen, that the anger of God proceeds with a slow step to avenge itself, but that it compensates for its tardiness by the severity of its punishment. Hence there is no reason why reprobates should flatter themselves, when he seems to let them pass unobserved, 381 since he does not so repose in heaven, as to cease to be the Judge of the world; nor will he be unmindful of the execution of his office, in due time. 382 We infer, however, from the words of Moses, that though space for repentance is given to the reprobate, they are still devoted to destruction.

Some take the word אַיִן (ayon) for punishment, as if it had been said that punishment was not yet matured for them. But the former exposition is more suitable; namely, that they will set no bound to their wickedness , until they bring upon themselves final destruction.

17. Behold , a smoking furnace . Again a new vision was added, to confirm his faith in the oracle. At first, Abram was horror-struck with the thick darkness; now, in the midst of a smoking furnace, he sees a burning lamp. Many suppose that a sacrifice was consumed with this fire; but I rather interpret it as a symbol of future deliverance, which would well agree with the fact itself. For there are two things contrary to each other in appearance; the obscurity of smoke, and the shining of a lamp. Hence Abram knew that light would, at length, emerge out of darkness. An analogy is always to be sought for between signs, and the things signified, that there may be a mutual correspondence between them. Then, since the symbol, in itself, is but a lifeless carcass, reference ought always to be made to the word which is annexed to it. But here, by the word, liberty was promised to Abram's seed, in the midst of servitude. Now the condition of the Church could not be painted more to the life, than when God causes a burning torch to proceed out of the smoke, in order that the darkness of afflictions may not overwhelm us, but that we may cherish a good hope of life even in death; because the Lord will, at length, shine upon us, if only we offer up ourselves in sacrifice to Him.

18. In the same day the Lord made a covenant . I willingly admit what I have alluded to above, that the covenant was ratified by a solemn rite, when the animals were divided into parts. For there seems to be a repetition, in which he teaches what was the intent of the sacrifice which he has mentioned. Here, also, we may observe, what I have said, that the word is always to be joined with the symbols, lest our eyes be fed with empty and fruitless ceremonies. God has commanded animals to be offered to him; but he has shown their end and use, by a covenant appended to them. If, then, the Lord feeds us by sacraments, we infer, that they are the evidences of his grace, and the tokens of those spiritual blessings which flow from it.

He then enumerates the nations, whose land God was about to give to the sons of Abram, in order that he may confirm what he before said concerning a numerous offspring. For that was not to be a small band of men, but an immense multitude, for which the Lord assigns a habitation of such vast extent. God had before spoken only of the Amorites, among whom Abram then dwelt; but now, for the sake of amplifying his grace, he recounts all the others by name.

Footnotes

370

"Et filius derelictionis domus meae erit iste Damascenus Elihezer." That is, according to the usual interpretation of the Hebrew phrase, the son or person to whom the house was left in charge by its master; though Calvin gives it a different turn. The various ancient versions, except the Syriac, agree in this interpretation. Dathe prefers the translation of Schultens, who refers the word to an Arabic root, ■■■, which signifies to comb, to dress, or polish, and which he supposes may be applied generally to the care which a steward takes of everything in the house. But this is fanciful. -- Ed

371

"Acsi vocaret, Filium orbitatis." -- "Comme s'il l'appeloit, Fils de la maison, ou il n'y a point d'enfans." -- French Tr

372

"Melius ex antitheto patebit." -- "Toutefois on entendra mieux par l'antithese, c'est a dire, par ce qui est opposite, ce qu' emporte ceci." -- French Tr

373

The French version is strongly expressed. "Et pourtant ceus -- la gazouillent bien sottement, qui tirent ceci au bruit et renom de preud'hommie." Especially do they chatter foolishly enough, who draw this aside to the fame and renown of honesty. -- French Tr.

374

"Ergo ex ratione temporis certo colligimus." -- "Nous recueillons donc pour certain, selon la raison du temps auquel ceci fut dit a Abram." -- French Tr

375

"Corpus unum efficeret." -- "Et les joindre ensemble comme en un corps." And should join them together, as in one body. -- French Tr.

376

"Sed magis probabile videtur, notari duntaxat tempus intermedium." Calvin evidently means the time which was to intervene between the giving of the oracle and the exodus from Egypt. -- Ed

377

"De justis persecutionibus." Most probably a misprint for injustis; as both the Old French and English translations agree in rendering the word unjust.

378

"Quod nuper attigit," -- should doubtless be attigi; as the sense requires, and as it is rendered in the French version, with which the Old English Translation corresponds. -- Ed

379

"Εαμ γηροτρησκον appellat."

380

"Secure delicientur." -- "Prement leurs plaisirs sans souci ne crainte." -- French Tr

381

"Eo dissimulante."

382

"Nec officii sui in tempore obliviscatur." The sense given in the translation would perhaps scarcely have been elicited from these words, without the aid of Calvin's own French translation, which thus renders the passage, 'Et ne s'oublie point de faire son office en temps due.' The Old English version, by adhering to a barely literal rendering, deprives the sentence of all meaning; "neither doth he in time forget his duty." -- Ed

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