

ARTICLE V.

HOW WAS ABRAHAM SAVED?

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THERE is a legend preserved in the Koran, that the conversion of Abraham occurred in this manner: "When night overshadowed him, he saw a star and said, 'This is my Lord.' But when it set he said, 'I like not those that set.' And when he saw the moon rising he said, 'This is my Lord.' But when the moon set he answered, 'Verily, if my Lord direct me not in the right way, I shall be as one of those who err.' And when he saw the sun rising he said, 'This is my Lord. This is greater than the star or moon.' But when the sun went down he said, 'O, my people, I am clear of these things. I turn my face to Him Who hath made the heaven and the earth.'"¹ Such a story is full of interest, and all the more so when we see the points of similarity between this and the story which we find in the fifteenth chapter of Genesis, where the stars are indeed made to play an important part in Abraham's spiritual history. In this passage and in the fourth chapter of Romans, we have the inspired account of at least the manner of Abraham's conversion. Only a moment's comparison of these two passages is needed, in order to show that they are thus closely related. In speaking of Abraham's justification, Paul writes: "What saith the Scripture? Abraham *believed God*, and it was counted [reckoned, revised version,] unto him for righteousness" (Rom. iv. 3). And the particular Scripture which is intended is indicated in verse eighteen, where we read, "Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of

¹ Stanley.

many nations, according to that which was spoken, '*So shall thy seed be.*'" On comparing this with the fifteenth chapter of Genesis we find that just such a promise is there made to Abraham. The patriarch had complained of his childlessness, and intimated that the head servant of his household was really his heir. And the Lord comforts him with the promise that, instead of this, one born of his own flesh shall be his heir. And then He brought him out under the clear vault of heaven, in which were flashing myriads of stars, and bade him look up, and number them if he could. And, as Abraham's glance swept across the glittering sky, He declared unto him, "*So shall thy seed be.*" And the same comment follows immediately which we have already quoted from the first part of the fourth of Romans: "And he *believed in the Lord*, and He counted it to him for righteousness" (ver. 6). It is evident, therefore, that this was the passage which St. Paul had in mind, and the two may, without doubt, be considered as parallel. And that they refer to the manner of Abraham's conversion is evident from the parallelism which St. Paul draws between this transaction of Abraham and that of the sinner, in the Christian dispensation, who believes on God unto justification of life. He says (ver. 23), "Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on Him that raised up Jesus, our Lord, from the dead; Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification. Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. iv. 23-v. 1).

Therefore, simple belief in God on the part of Abraham, of which a striking instance is given us in the fifteenth of Genesis, is clearly set forth as the act through which he obtained justification of life, and entered into peace with God. It is only a more complete description of this act of faith which the apostle gives, when he adds: "He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that what He had promised He was able also to perform" (Rom. iv. 20, 21).

There were doubtless other instances of similar character in Abraham's life, as at the time of his original call out of Chaldea, and at the time of his offering Isaac. But the inspired comments of the apostle on this incident in the fifteenth of Genesis make very plain the true nature of that act by which Abraham secured justification of life.

Let us examine this typical transaction a moment. What Abraham did was to accept the promise of God as though it had already been performed. The word of God was to him a fact. He took to himself the riches of God's love as thus revealed. And, though no heir was apparent, he found in God his comfort, his hope, and his assurance. Henceforth, not in himself, but in God, was his confidence. And this faith in Himself God reckoned to Abraham as though it were righteousness. That is, there was an act of God toward Abraham exactly corresponding to the act of Abraham toward God. As Abraham accepted the promise as if the thing promised had already been given, so God accepted Abraham's faith in Him, as though the results of faith had already been secured—as though he were already the good and holy man which through faith he had begun to be. God's bare promise stood to Abraham for innumerable posterity. Abraham's faith stood to God for perfected righteousness of character. Abraham felt and acted toward a gracious God as if he had already received this mighty race. God dealt with confiding Abraham as though he had already attained completeness of holy character. Abraham's faith was the earnest of what was to follow and a sufficient guarantee.

And thus Abraham was justified before God. That moment in the darkness under the silent stars was one of the supreme moments of his life. Those stars became signs and memorials of God's infinite grace. "Henceforward they had new meanings to him, as, long before, the rainbow had to Noah. Abraham drew himself upward by the stars. Every night they spoke to him of his posterity and his greatness. They were henceforward not stars only, but promises and oaths and

blessings.”² “Abraham BELIEVED GOD and it was counted unto him for righteousness.” Whether this was his original justification and the hour of his new birth or not, it is evidently a reliable presentation of the belief through which that justification was secured.

It will be noticed that nothing whatever is here said of Christ. There is no reference to any atoning work of His. There is simply a childlike trust in God that He will be to him all that he needs. The Lord is taken as his portion and his inheritance. There is apparently no thought whatever of the Lord Jesus as the way to God. The clear revelation of Christ which has been made to us had not been given. Evidently, therefore, we have the case of a man saved without a knowledge of the historic Christ. But Abraham, evidently, was only an example of many Hebrews who exercised such faith. There were without doubt, therefore, very many among the ancient Hebrews and later Jews who were saved without a knowledge of the historic Christ.

Of course we do not say that Abraham was, or that any one else can be, saved without Christ. In the plan of God the sacrifice of Christ was provided from the foundation of the world. It was only on the ground of that sacrifice that mercy on the part of God could be extended to any one. Abraham no less than Paul was saved only through the precious blood of Jesus. But it is also true that Abraham had little or no light, at the time, as to the real ground of his acceptance before God. His act was simply a trustful acceptance of God's love as expressed in His promise.

There is nothing contrary to this view in what is said by our Saviour in John viii. 56, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad;” nor in what is said by the apostle in Gal. iii. 8, “the Scripture . . . preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, ‘In thee shall all nations be blessed.’” Both of these passages seem to refer to the same occasion, when Abraham gained a sort of prophetic glimpse of the coming Redeemer. And the quota-

² Parker.

tion in the last passage indicates that the occasion was some time subsequent to that of Abraham's conversion, and occurred in connection with the sacrifice of Isaac. (Compare Gal. iii. 8, with Gen. xxii. 18.) These passages only show that, while a knowledge of Christ is not absolutely necessary for salvation, it is yet so important for Christian *character* that it was afterwards granted in some measure, though dimly, to Abraham as "the friend of God."

Now if what has been said is correct there are important inferences to be drawn, which bear forcibly upon certain present controversies.

It is obvious that if Abraham was saved through Christ without a knowledge of him as he is revealed to us in the Gospels, then others may be. There is no reason to suppose that the privilege has been confined even to the nation to which he belonged. The apostle Paul, on the contrary, in the second chapter of Romans, gives us the clearest assurance that it is offered to all the Gentiles, even such as have never heard the gospel. God has revealed himself to them in his works, and has written his law in their hearts and consciences. (The almost universal system of sacrifices is a witness to their sense of sin and dim conception of atonement.) And it is according to their use of this light which is given them that they are to be judged, and not according to their use of a gospel which has never been preached to them. So that, as St. Peter declared, "in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is accepted with Him." (Acts x. 35.)

It is true that the argument of St. Paul, in the first and second chapters of Romans, is to prove that both Jew and Heathen have sinned, and so have no salvation by *law*, whether written or unwritten. But he goes right on, in the third chapter, to show that there is a way of salvation by *grace* to those who have broken the written law. And in the fourth chapter he shows that this method of salvation by grace extends even to those who, like Abraham, are without the written law or the revelation of Christ. In the third chapter he makes belief in

Christ prominent. He speaks of God, setting him forth "to be a propitiation through faith in his blood." But in the fourth chapter there is a conspicuous absence of such a requirement for Abraham and others who preceded the gospel dispensation. There it is simple belief in God which is emphasized.

The heathen, therefore, who have never heard of Christ, do not on that account require a probation after death in order to have a fair chance of salvation. We see that they have such a fair chance without such knowledge. So that the theory of a future probation becomes utterly gratuitous. The sacrifice of Christ avails for every one of them, who in this life may yield himself up in childlike trust to the light which he receives from God, whether that light be little or much. Those who faithfully follow that light, however dim, we believe are saved, not legally, but by grace; while those who turn aside from it and reject it are lost. Just as those in Christian lands who follow the greater light of a fully revealed Christianity are saved, but are lost if they despise it. Each class is judged according to the circumstances and conditions in which it is found. God's plan of salvation is available for all men in the present life. It needs no annex in the life to come.

It may be asked, "On the principles stated, what *gain* is there in the gospel over the truth which Abraham possessed? Why need one, even in this Christian dispensation, preach anything else than simple confidence in God, hearty trust in him, and acceptance of his will for one's self, without any reference to Christ?" We answer by asking, Is there any gain in the splendor of the noontide over the dimness of the dawn? Would anyone who has received the full light of the gospel be satisfied to go back to the privileges of Abraham, or to the opportunities of the heathen? The gospel pours the light of day on the way of salvation. It makes clear *how* God can be just and yet justify the ungodly who may believe in him. It tells us of the cross, and explains to us just what Christ has done to make it possible for men to be saved.

And thus it satisfies the questioning of conscience, and affords a ground for peace such as would otherwise be impossible. And thus it becomes "the power of God unto salvation," as no other plan could claim to be. It appeals to men's reason and captivates men's hearts. The believing acceptance of what Christ has done for one is easier than naked trust in God, whom one has offended. The conscience is satisfied, the heart is touched, and the will is captivated, through the revelation of God's love in Christ. Belief on Christ becomes belief in and hearty acceptance of the Father's love with all the blessings which such love promises, and all the obligations which such love imposes.

The gospel, therefore, is to be preached with all earnestness. We should be in haste to give it to every man, because it offers him the best light as to how he may escape the consequences of his sins, and free himself from their power, and so greatly increases his chances for such an escape. We cannot deny that without the gospel it is probable that there are many who perish who might have been saved if they had possessed it. Our Lord said that Tyre and Sidon and even Sodom would have repented if they had had the gospel privileges of Bethsaida and Capernaum. We are to send the gospel to the heathen, therefore, as quickly as possible—not because all will necessarily be lost without it, but because a so much larger number on any calculation would in all likelihood be saved. We do not diminish their chances by increasing their light, but we add vastly to their opportunities, when we make plain to them the story of the cross. And besides this, the gospel would bring, even to such as might have secured salvation without it, a peace and joy and comfortable assurance, and ethical teachings and spiritual incentives to a holy life, which could not be had otherwise. The thrilling question of Bishop Heber will always be pertinent:

Shall we whose souls are lighted
 With wisdom from on high,
 Shall we to men benighted
 The lamp of life deny?
 Salvation! oh, Salvation!
 The joyful sound proclaim,
 Till earth's remotest nation
 Has learned *Messiah's* name.

It will be noticed that no estimate has been ventured of the number of heathen that in all probability are saved graciously without the gospel. Whether that number is supposed to be large or small does not affect the argument. It seems unscientific to make our interpretation of facts to depend upon our wishes as to what might be true. In the search for truth it is only the real facts of the case and their necessary meaning that we have to consider. But if, when a conclusion has been reached, which the facts clearly justify, it is found to be in harmony with our desires, it will be so much the more a matter for gratulation. And we do not see why it may not be allowable, on the grounds above presented, to suppose that the number of even adult heathen who may be saved, though dying without the gospel, is a large one; and this in addition to the one-third or the one-half of the whole number of heathen who die in infancy. We believe there is ground in what has been presented for "vindicating God's goodness and mercy as well as his strict justice." The actual number we can trustfully leave with him, when we are satisfied that we are doing all in our power to give the gospel to the heathen of our own generation.

It remains to notice one or two objections to this line of argument. It has been said by the advocates of a future probation for the heathen that, "As to Abraham and his descendants, the instance is clearly exceptional. They had more than the light of nature. They had a special revelation from God concerning his righteousness and mercy. They knew of redemption on condition of penitence and faith. Their knowledge of God, although obscure, was in many respects the knowledge given afterwards more fully by Christ. And while their salvation proves *that knowledge of the historic Christ was not absolutely necessary*, [italics ours], still they were recipients of that which was preparatory to the gospel, and directly predictive of it" (Progressive Orthodoxy, p. 85). This extract, while it suggests the objection that Abraham's case was exceptional, also grants all that we have been seeking to prove, viz., "that knowledge of the historic

Christ was not absolutely necessary." And if not necessary for Abraham and his descendants, why absolutely necessary for any others who have never received the gospel? It makes no difference what other light these had to save them. That light was not the gospel. How then can it be held that gospel light is absolutely indispensable for others? Whether the light and privileges of the heathen equal those of Abraham is another question. But, in granting the salvation of Abraham and many of his descendants without a knowledge of the historic Christ, is not the principle which underlies the scheme of a future probation for the heathen abandoned? That principle is thus stated: that no one can see Christ as Judge who has not first seen him as Saviour. And yet here are many saved who had never seen Him at all. The scheme referred to rests upon the postulate of "the absoluteness and universality of Christianity," in the sense that "the Christian is the only type of man acceptable to God," and that every man in Christian or in heathen lands, in ancient or in modern times, must have "the opportunity to become a Christian," *i. e.*, must have the clear offer of Christ as a Saviour. But if this postulate breaks down on Bible testimony, in quite a number of cases, what force remains to it? Exceptional cases destroy it, for it is a postulate of universality. To say that Abraham and his descendants are exceptional is to abandon it.

But what shall be said concerning the superior light which it is here intimated that Abraham enjoyed? Did it place him on a different footing, as regards salvation, from the unenlightened heathen? Once admit in his case the principle of salvation by grace through faith, without a knowledge of the gospel, and you have a principle which will apply to every class which is without the gospel. On the ground of Christ's atonement in behalf of all men, grace can make allowance for lack of light, and on that account may give Abraham's blessing to far less than Abraham's faith. If the gospel be not absolutely indispensable, no man can say that any specified measure of other light is. Abraham and Socrates alike

are dealt with in grace. But it may be objected that the views here suggested would work *a change in the object of faith*. We think not. They leave the gospel command still in force wherever it may be heard: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." But they show that this belief on Christ is belief on him as the revelation of God in the flesh. "God was *in Christ* reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Cor. v. 19). God comes nearer to us in Christ than He did to Abraham. We have in Christ only a richer, fuller, more gracious, and satisfactory presentation of God. To believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, therefore, is still only to believe on God, but on the God as an embodiment of divine love and tenderness and grace and truth and holiness, such as it was impossible for Abraham to conceive, and such as is most wonderfully adapted to call forth the hearty trust and love of every man who will consider Him. We can put the old prescription of the gospel, therefore, in no better or captivating form. The answer of Paul to the Philippian jailer, when he came trembling and asked, "What must I do to be saved?" is still the best answer for every inquiring soul: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."