

### How Can I know?

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Second Sunday in Lent, February 19, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 15:1-12; 17-18; Psalm 127; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

The new members class are asked to write what it is they believe about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; what they believe are the responsibilities of church members; and, finally, they're asked to write a short answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved or put right with God."

Now the answer to that last question is found in our Old Testament Scripture lesson. Abraham was in a quandary. The promise of God had been given that he would have innumerable descendants, but Sarah was still childless. How could he be the father of multitudes without a son? Since ~~he had no children, would one of the servants born in his household be~~ heir? No. Instead, the Lord made Abraham what seemed to be an impossible promise. He and Sarah would have a son. Abraham found that very difficult to believe. He was a hundred years old and Sarah was ninety. What follows in Genesis 15:6 is one of the most crucial verses in the Old Testament. "Abram put his trust in the Lord, and because of this the Lord was pleased with him and accepted him." The King James Version reads, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness."

God accepted Abraham on the basis of Abraham's faith. Every Protestant who knows anything at all about Protestant beliefs knows that justification by faith was what got the Reformation started. Luther was a man tormented by doubts about how he stood with God. He knew that God was a righteous God who wouldn't let sin go unpunished, and he was terrified that he was not good enough to escape God's wrathful judgment. "How can I find a gracious God" was the question that plagued his life. He

became a monk and gave himself full time to the attempt to earn God's acceptance by an extraordinary religious life. But the harder he tried, the more he realized that he would never be good enough to merit salvation, and the more anxious, despairing and guilt-ridden he became. Finally, he stumbled across the Good News of the Gospel that we don't have to save ourselves by "being good" to satisfy God's righteous demands. What we cannot do for ourselves, God has done for us in Christ. We are put right with God- we are saved- not by our own efforts to climb up to God but by his free grace in coming to us. Just when we give up the futile attempt to merit God's love, acknowledge that we are and always will be unworthy in ourselves, and trust his goodness instead of our own- just then we'll discover that salvation is not a prize to be won by our good works, but a gift to be accepted by faith.

But what is faith? The importance of faith pervades the Bible. But what is faith?

First, faith is more than believing certain things are true, but it includes this. In the Apostles' Creed our beliefs are summarized. "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord... and in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." Faith is believing that these affirmations are true. God exists. Jesus is God's Son and our Lord and Savior. The Holy Spirit is the giver of life who spoke through the prophets. At the center of these beliefs is Jesus. We believe that what God is, Jesus is. We believe that God has declared Himself and His purpose for us in the man, Jesus of Nazareth. God looks at the world through the eyes of Jesus.

But, secondly, faith, Christian faith, is trust. Notice that in Genesis

15:6, we read that Abraham put his trust in the Lord. But in verse 6 we hear Abraham asking God, "How can I know?" Abraham believed, but he didn't know. Faith is believing when you don't know. Faith isn't irrational. It isn't believing what you know isn't true. But faith takes us further than knowledge can take us. Faith makes a decision before all the evidence is in.

Throughout the Bible men and women of faith are shown as people who took a risk and bet their lives on God. G.A. Studdert-Kennedy, a British chaplain in World War I once wrote a poem that goes this way:

How do I know that God is good? I don't,  
I gamble like a man. I bet my life  
Upon one side in life's great war. I must,  
I can't stand out. I must take sides. The man  
~~Who is a neutral in this fight is not~~  
A man.

How is it proved?  
It isn't proved, you fool, it can't be proved.  
How can you prove a victory before  
It's won? How can you prove a man who leads,  
To be a leader worth the following,  
Unless you follow to the death- and out  
Beyond mere death, which is not anything  
But Satan's lie upon eternal life?  
Well- God's my leader, and I hold that He  
Is good, and strong enough to work His plan  
And purpose out to its appointed end.

Faith involves risk. Faith means basing your life, your plans, your decisions, your actions on what you believe. It means getting out onto the ice when you aren't quite certain if it will bear your weight. It means taking risks because you believe in Jesus. You take a risk when you trust Jesus. Jesus says, for example, "If someone slaps you on the right cheek,

turn your other cheek." That's risky. Some would say it's foolish. Jesus doesn't promise us that if only we trust God all will go well with us, at least in the short run. He promises the cross in some shape or form. He tells us to put our whole trust in God in spite of the worst that may happen, partly because, as He constantly assures us, God suffers with us and will never stop caring.

Faith, then, is first, belief and, second, trust and then, third, faith comes with obedience. St. James writes, "My brothers, what good is it for someone to say that he has faith if his actions do not prove it? Can that faith save him?... Show me how anyone can have faith without actions. I will show you my faith by my actions."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer beautifully describes the connection between faith and obedience in an imaginary conversation of a man with his pastor:

"I have lost the faith I once had." "You must listen to the Word as it is spoken to you in the sermon." "I do; but I cannot get anything out of it, it just falls on deaf ears as far as I am concerned." "The trouble is, you don't really want to listen." "On the contrary, I do." And here they generally break off, because the pastor is at a loss what to say next.... The pastor feels himself confronted with the ultimate riddle of predestination. God grants faith to some and withholds it from others. So the pastor throws up the sponge and leaves the poor man to his fate. And yet this ought to be the turning-point of the interview.... The pastor should give up arguing with him, and stop taking his difficulties seriously. That will really be in the man's own interest, for he is only trying to hide himself behind them. It is now time to take the bull by the horns and say: 'Only those who obey believe.... You are disobedient, you are trying to keep some part of your life under your own control. That is what is preventing you from listening to Christ and believing in his grace. You cannot hear Christ because you are wilfully disobedient. Somewhere in your heart you are refusing to listen to his call. Your difficulty is your sins.... Tear yourself away from all other attachments and follow him.'

Let me go back to the sermon title, to the question of Abraham, "How

can I know?" How can we know God's promises are true? We can know that we are justified and put right with God? Only as we exercise faith. Faith is a way of knowing. We can know the truth of the Christian faith only if we believe in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We can know only as we trust God's word and promise. We can know only as we follow Christ in obedience to our life's end.

Let us pray :