

THE CONCEPT OF FAITH DEVELOPED
IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS

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Dr. James E. Allman
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by
Matthew O. Walker
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Introduction

“Faith.” It is just one simple, five-letter word, and yet when said a myriad of images are evoked in a person’s mind. Some may say that they have faith in themselves; others may contest to their faith in a divine being that moves life circumstances and people about as though they were simply marionettes attached to an owner’s strings. Some people claim to have faith in God, and yet believe that their own merit will enable them to deserve Heaven. Whether religious or not, people around the word will claim to have some aspect of faith. However, when their definition of faith is examined it will come up lacking a solid foundation. Without this abstract concept of faith being clearly defined and thus being made applicable to daily life, it does nothing. So, then, one must examine just exactly what faith is. Intertwined throughout the book of Genesis, the concept of faith develops significantly and becomes foundational to understanding what faith is. The thesis of this paper is that the concept of faith is defined from the book of Genesis as a trust in God to do what he promises and is vividly recorded, both positively and negatively, in the lives of three key individuals.

The three key individuals are Noah, Abraham, and Joseph. This paper will present each of these individuals and show how they defined and modeled the concept of faith in Genesis.

Noah

The first key individual that models and helps define the concept of faith in Genesis is Noah. In Genesis 6:5 it says, “The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.” Due to this evil, Genesis 6:7 says that God was going to wipe mankind out from the earth because he was grieved that He had made them. However, because of his grace and mercy he decided to save Noah. Genesis 6:8 says, “Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.” In Genesis 6:13-21 God gave Noah specific instructions on how to build the ark and complete everything to prepare

for the flood. God's instructions to Noah included everything from what wood to use in verse 14, to what animals to bring on the ark with them in verse 19. Even though God commanded Noah to do something that was a completely crazy in the eyes of men, Genesis 6:22 says, "Noah did everything just as God commanded him." The Noah narrative doesn't mention any type of hesitancy or resistance on the part of Noah. Thus, Noah positively portrays the concept of faith in Genesis by trusting in God's promise and acting upon His commands.

Abraham

Abraham, who many refer to as the model of faithfulness, is the main individual from which the concept of faith in Genesis can be developed. However, Abraham is not always presented as the perfect model for the concept of faith in Genesis. Abraham, also known as Abram during most of his life, eventually developed an implicit trust in God after progressing through many years filled with uncertainty and wavering faith in God.

Abram is first introduced in Genesis 12:1 where God said to Abram, "leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." Just as the Noah narrative presents a command that seems crazy in the eyes of man, God commands Abram to do something that seems ridiculous to the culture he lives in. However, the beginning of Genesis 12:4 shows that Abram has incredible trust in God because he does leave as the Lord had told him. Certainly, Abram exercised an incredible amount of faith in God to leave his home in Ur and travel to an unknown land. Just when we are in awe of his seemingly implicit faith, the same verse continues on to say, "Lot went with him." Abram allowed his nephew Lot to come with him when he left his homeland even though the Lord's command was for Abram to leave his people and his father's household. Consequently, the first introduction of this "model of faithfulness" shows Abraham to be a man that exercises a great deal of trust in God, yet doesn't seem to obey God's command perfectly. Thus, Abrahams partially failed in his first opportunity

to positively model the concept of faith in Genesis as Noah did by doing just as the Lord commanded.

In the end of Genesis 12, Abram goes to Egypt because of the famine in the land. While in Egypt, his faith in God seems to be shaken as he lies about his wife Sarai in an attempt to save his life. This shows that Abram had not completely trusted God with his life and thought that he could take better care of it than God could. This passage in the end of Genesis 12 continues the negativistic turn that Abram's faith began earlier in the chapter. It is important to note, "the Lord blessed Abram through Pharaoh despite Abram's deceptive ways."¹ Often times people equate God's blessing with our faithfulness to Him, but the Abram narrative in Genesis 12 proves that concept false. God blesses whom He chooses to bless.

A pivotal point in Abram's life seems to occur in Genesis 15 when God presented His covenant with Abram. Inserted in the middle of the narrative are four words that would seem to show evidence of a change in his life, "Abram believed the Lord" (Genesis 15:6). Vos says this of Genesis 15:6, "He implicitly and unequivocally trusted the "Sovereign Lord" as the One superior to all natural processes and the One who would do what He promises; and on the basis of Abram's faith God justified him or declared him righteous."² Drane comments on this same verse and says, "Abraham is indeed depicted as a man of great faith who 'put his trust in the Lord'."³ The result of Abram's belief in the Lord is what makes this such a pivotal point. God, in his grace and mercy, credited Abram's belief to him as righteousness. David says, "Abraham becomes the father of the people of God, the paradigm of faith, faith not in the sense of intellectual assent to a series of confessional statements, but faith as personal trust in and

¹ Charles Dyer and Gene Merrill. *Old Testament Explorer*. (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 19.

² Howard F. Vos, *Everyman's Bible Commentary: Genesis*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 82.

³ John Drane, *Old Testament Faith*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986). 41.

commitment to God.”⁴ This single verse serves as the turning point in Abram’s life. It does not mean that he will have a perfectly faithful life from this point on, because he doesn’t. His faith stumbles and seems to disappear in just the next chapter. The importance is that he has placed his complete trust in God.

In Genesis chapter 16 Abram’s newly professed belief in God is quickly forgotten as he takes matters into his own hands just as he did previously when traveling into Egypt. Abram knows God has promised him a son through whom all his descendants will follow, but in Genesis 16:1 it says, “Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children.” At the urging of his wife, Abram sleeps with Hagar, an Egyptian maidservant, who conceives and gives birth to a son. This is a crucial point in the Abram narrative because it shows that even after Abram had put his trust in God he stumbles in his faith. Even though Abram’s faith falters, God does not take his promise away from Abram but fulfills His covenant.

The final example Genesis shows of how Abraham modeled faith is most likely where Abraham “earned” the title of the “model of faithfulness” in most individuals eyes. Abraham’s faith was proven impeccable when he was commanded by God to take his son Isaac and sacrifice him on the mountain. The command God gave Abraham here in Genesis 22 is the most unexpected command that Abraham could have received. Abraham has finally received the son that the Lord had promised him and now God is asking Abraham to kill his one and only son. Not only did he do exactly as God commanded, but Genesis 22:3 says he got up “early the next morning.” He did not wait around and ask God for confirmation or question God’s unusual command. He simply trusted in God.

Understanding that the concept of faith in Genesis is defined as trust in God to do what he has promised, Abraham’s faith was drastically transformed after receiving God’s

⁴ Robert Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt*. (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1983), 42.

promises. Having received the promise of God in his son Isaac, he was willing to do anything in the later years of his life. Davidson concludes, “Thus Abraham is viewed as the model for faith in as much as he is a man who responds in trust to what God promises, and on this basis he is in a right relationship with, acceptable to, God.”

Abraham’s life of faith is not a consistent story, but a real struggle in faith. The model of faithfulness in his life consists of high points, low points, and several other points in between. His life presents very positive models for the concept of faith in Genesis, while at other times presents a model of faithlessness and deceit. Overall, both Abraham’s positive and negative models of faith contribute significantly to the concept of faith in Genesis.

Joseph

Unlike the previous models presented in Genesis, Joseph’s life presents a model for a seemingly perfect faith. This does not mean that Joseph was perfect by any means, but the portion of his life recorded in Genesis gives a very positive model of the concept of faith.

At the age of 17, Joseph is almost killed by his brothers, eventually is sold into slavery, and finds himself in Egypt. In Genesis 39:2 it says, “The Lord was with Joseph.” Through all that Joseph had gone through, God was with him. It is important to look at the fact that Joseph was not put through these hardships because of his lack of faith or commitment to God. This is in sharp contrast to Abraham’s narrative where he was still blessed by God through Pharaoh even though Abraham was acting deceitfully. Joseph faces many hardships, but he still remains faithful to God and the Lord is with him. The point that must be concluded from this is that the blessings in our life are no indication of our faithfulness to God. God shows favor on those whom he chooses to show favor. Joseph realized this and kept his faith in God even through the tough times.

Just as everything seems to be going well for Joseph in Genesis 39:3-5, he is unexpectedly faced with an incredible test. Much like Abraham’s tests from God, Joseph is

confronted with an opportunity to obey God or take matters into his own hands. The wife of his master tries to seduce Joseph and persuade him to go bed with her in Genesis 39:7. Joseph could easily say yes to her offer, but he does not. Not only does he say that his master would not approve, but most importantly, he said it would be a sin against God in Genesis 39:9. After all Joseph had gone through, he still trusted God and wanted to honor Him by doing what was right. Ultimately, Joseph ended up in prison after being falsely accused by Potiphar's wife of assaulting her. Throughout all these hardships, Joseph remembered the dreams of prosperity from his youth and remained faithful to God.

Even while Joseph was in prison, he did not lose faith in God's promise and continued to interpret dreams, Genesis 40:8. Though Joseph might not have understood his imprisonment, he was still faithful to God. Two years passed while Joseph was in prison. Eventually, he was given the opportunity to go before Pharaoh and interpret Pharaoh's dreams. At this point in the narrative it would be easy to see Joseph reject the opportunity to interpret more dreams because up until this point dreams have brought him nothing but turmoil. Joseph however, does go before Pharaoh and says, "God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires," in Genesis 41:16. Joseph doesn't hesitate but shows his commitment and trust in God.

The Lord eventually brought Joseph to the highest ranking position in Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh himself. Joseph was not given this position because of his unwavering trust in God. Joseph was given the position because God had promised it to Joseph in a dream many years before.

Even when faced with unexplainable trials and problems, Joseph never let his circumstances destroy his faith. Thus, Joseph positively displayed the concept of faith in Genesis by trusting in God to fulfill his promises.

Conclusion

Faith, though not specifically mentioned by name in Genesis, manifests itself and develops significantly throughout the book. It is much more than an abstract thought casually handled in Genesis. The very foundations of the book of Genesis are constructed around the concept of faith modeled in individual lives. It is not only conveyed and defined from the positive models that Genesis presents, but the negative models as well. The context and situations in which Noah, Abraham, and Joseph are forced to exhibit their trust in God provides us with the complete picture of what real faith means. Thus, the concept of faith is clearly shown as trusting in the promises of God and acting upon those promises in a way that is pleasing to God.

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