

Chapter 7

Miracle Necessary as the Foundation of Faith (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob)

THE DIVINE communications to the fathers—(Abraham, Isaac and Jacob)—may be considered as the next exhibition of the visible hand of God. The nature of these communications was considered in the chapter devoted to Adam’s intercourse with the Elohim in Eden. We need not further refer to this beyond recalling the fact that they were made by the agency of angels. The reality and practical nature of this agency has been before dwelt upon, particularly in [chapter ii](#). of *The Ways of Providence*. It is sufficient now to recognise the necessity existing for its employment in the case in question.

Abraham had to be induced to leave his native parts, and take up his abode in a strange land, as a beginning of the purpose of God in Christ, who was to be Abraham’s seed. The leaving had to be voluntary and an act of obedience, the result of faith in a promise relating to futurity. How was such a result to be brought about without the voice of supernatural command? God could easily have compassed the removal of Abraham in the ways of Providence without the voice of revelation: but how in that case would Abraham’s action have possessed the character of direct obedience? and how could God have conveyed promises of good things to come? It might have been done by dream or inspiration but this would only have been another form of the visible hand of God, and not so suitable for the end in view as the voice of direct communication. The end in view was to give Abraham a basis of faith and to put his obedience to the test. And how could Abraham have faith in a promise, or be submissive to a commandment around which the least uncertainty should be left as to its divinity? Dream, vision, or inspiration, may be sufficient when connected with other actual interpositions of the divine hand, as in Abraham’s own case afterwards ([Gen. 15:1](#)); but as the foundation of a vital plan, they were not so suitable as the unmistakable angelic voice. The plan was at a very vital and fundamental stage in the case. Abraham was to be constituted “the father of all them that believe” by receiving the promises in virtue of which God’s goodness should afterwards, be manifested upon earth. Hence, it was important there should be no doubt as to the authorship of the promises. Uncertainty on this point would have interfered with the confidence of faith; for how can a man have faith in a friend’s word if he is not sure that it is in reality the word of his friend? If ever there was need for the visible hand of God, it was here.

The ideas of those who prefer “a religion without miracle” are strangely at variance with the first principle of all Bible religion, which consists of faith in the promises of God. “Without faith it is impossible to please Him” ([Heb. 9:6](#)). It has been arranged from the beginning that God would “*justify the heathen (the nations) through faith*” ([Gal. 3:8](#)). And faith, we are told, “is the substance of THINGS HOPED FOR” ([Heb. 11:1](#))—hoped for, because promised, as in the case of Abraham, who “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. 4:20, 21](#)). How was faith of this sort to be exercised without the spoken promise

of God for it to be exercised upon? And if a promise spoken by God be a miracle, and the first principle of true religion be the belief of God's promises, how can there be religion without miracle as the basis of it? The answer is evident. To speak of "religion without miracle" is as incongruous as it would be to speak of science without nature. Miracle, or the specific act of God, is the very foundation of religion, as the very word religion signifies—a binding together again. God and man have been sundered: religion is God's device for reconciliation: and how can there be such a device without God devising it?

The angels frequently visited Abraham, in laying the foundations of faith: also Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise— ([Gen. 17:1, 22](#); [18:1, 2](#); [19:1](#); [22:15](#); [26:2](#); [32:1](#); etc., etc.). Thus were afforded repeated evidences of the divinity of the promises. And thus were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob enabled to believe. God is not unreasonable. He does not ask man to believe without evidence, but having given evidence of His having spoken, He is pleased with faith being placed in what He has said. What is said of Abraham was true of all three and of all belonging to their family since their day: "He believed God, and *it was counted unto him for righteousness*" ([Gen. 15:6](#), [Gal. 3:6](#)). This has a practical bearing on every man. The statement as to the consequence of Abraham's faith is not merely historic. As Paul says, "It was *not written for his sake alone*, that it (righteousness) was imputed to him, but *for us also*, to whom it shall be imputed if we believe, etc." ([Rom. 4:23](#)). It is a principle governing the divine dealings with man that faith is "counted for righteousness." The reasonableness of this, though so opposed to the current of modern thought, must appear instantly on reflection. What is more displeasing between one man and another than for a man to doubt the word of his friend? How much more displeasing must such an attitude be towards God? This reflection has only to be turned round to enable us to realise why God should reckon belief as righteousness. How important is such a reflection in such an age as this when faith of all kinds is esteemed as of the lowest account. The idea of believing having anything to do with righteousness, seems an outrage to the ethical conceptions of a generation that glories in the Greek philosophers as authorities in morals. It is an idea nevertheless founded in true reason, as all divine ideas are. The divine view of a matter must be the sole standard of our moral estimate of it. To kill when God commands is no murder: to be merciful when God forbids is a crime ([1 Sam. 15:18, 19, 33](#)). The divine appointment governs all. If it please Him to consider faith righteousness, and unfaith, wickedness, who shall demur? It has pleased Him so to do after giving reason for the exercise of faith. The whole apostolic ministry, styled by Paul "the ministry of reconciliation," is based upon this principle. Belief or unbelief primarily defines a man's relation to God. "He that believeth shall be saved and he that believeth not shall be condemned." Justification by faith, or a being accounted righteous for faith's sake, is a well-known and scriptural periphrasis for the gospel. When the nature of faith is apprehended, as a mental condition induced by testimony addressed to the understanding ([Rom. 10:17](#); [Matt. 13:23](#)) and laying hold of certain expectations as a matter of joyful hope ([Heb. 11:1](#); [3:6](#)) the subject becomes clear. God is pleased to reckon such a state of mind as righteousness in the person who is the subject of it. When a man becomes aware of the promises God has made, and believes them, he is in the state of mind that is well pleasing to Him, and when he gives this state of mind its logical expression in the obedience which has been prescribed for such, his faith is made perfect by his works, and God, for Christ's sake, on whom He laid the iniquities of us all, forgives his sins, and he stands justified by faith.

But this has its root in the visible hand of God. If God had not spoken (or shown His visible hand), there would have been no ground for faith. A man cannot believe if there is nothing presented to his mind for belief. A man cannot honour God by believing His promises, if God

has made no promises. Hence, the whole scheme of salvation by faith presupposes the miracle of revelation. The ground of faith is the evidence of this miracle having taken place. Abraham had the evidence in the form of angelic visitation. The contemporaries of the apostles had the evidence in the testimony of the witnesses to Christ's resurrection and in God's visible confirmation of that testimony by "divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit" ([Heb. 2:2](#)). In our day, we have it in a less direct, but not less convincing, though in a less easily apprehended form: in the evidence we possess that this testimony was so given and so confirmed in the first century. The principle of the thing is the same in all cases. Those who say that the belief of evidence as a mere act of reason, depending upon power to perceive the credibility of the evidence, cannot afford a reasonable ground of acceptance with God, forget that it is not the mere belief that God has spoken that justifies, but the belief that what God has spoken He will perform. Such a belief is honouring to God, and He says, "Them that honour me I will honour." Even if it were not possible to discern the reasonableness of the ways of God, it would be the attitude of wisdom to submit to what He has revealed; but when that which God has ordained is self-evidently reasonable, there is but one issue for true reason, and that is, in a joyful and submissive faith.

The exhibition of the visible hand of God was a necessity in the case of the fathers. Men reason narrowly when they argue that because men of the nineteenth century can be saved without the occurrence of miracle in their experience, therefore the fathers could be saved without it. They forget that men of the nineteenth century stand upon what has been done before their day. Men of the nineteenth century have a Bible and a manifest history of God's doings in the past written upon the affairs of men as they now exist upon the face of the earth. But suppose those doings had not been performed; and that history had not been written, and we had not had the Bible, where should we have been? We should then have just stood in the same need of God's direct communication as the fathers. Apart from such communication, we should have been without guidance—without subject of faith—and without opportunity of obedience—for how can a man obey who has no commandments delivered to him?

The offering of Isaac by Abraham offers a further illustration of these principles. The embarrassment of the moderns in reference to this case is perfectly gratuitous, and due solely to the fact that they ignore, or fail to apprehend, the primary relation of God to man. They tacitly regard creation as existing for man's behoof and convenience. God's rights have vanished from their calculations. His proprietary relation to the universe is not a practical idea with them. They have reduced God to a beneficent principle or a passive impersonal energy with an intelligent turn, and have practically exalted man to the throne of the universe. Consequently, such an action on the part of Abraham as tying Isaac with cords, and laying him on an altar and lifting a knife to slay him, they cannot understand as a divine transaction at all. It is inconsistent with their notions of what is due to man. They experience a similar difficulty with the drowning of the antediluvians, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the extermination of the seven nations of Canaan. If they could but learn (as they might easily learn if they but believed in Christ as they profess to believe, and studied his life and sayings as they ought to study them) that God is a real God, a personal God, of an individual intelligence localised in substantial glory in the heavens, yet embracing measureless immensity by the effluence of His invisible energy, out of and by which He has made all things in His wisdom and for His glory, they would come easily to see that man is but an insignificant permitted form of His power, of no more account with God, even in his national aggregations and pomps, than the dust that a man sweeps out of his doors ([Isaiah 40:15](#)). Coming to see this, he would come to estimate aright God's wonderful condescension in having anything to say to man at all, still more in His having arranged for such

a wonderful emancipation as has been offered in Christ on the condition of faith and obedience. He would cease to wonder at the multitudes of rebels that have been swept from the face of the earth in God's dispensational visitations, and would wonder rather at the patience that permits so many generations of them to brave heaven with their insane effrontery. He would learn to perceive wisdom and fitness in the discipline to which he subjects, in various ways, the men who fear before Him in a reasonable way, especially in view of the fact that the race is in a state of alienation from Him, and that His dealings with men have been to invite approach, with a view to reconciliation on His own principles.

In such a state of enlightenment, no man would have any difficulty in understanding the offering of Isaac in the naked facts just as they stand recorded. It was a putting of Abraham to the test to ask him to offer up in sacrifice his only son (by Sarah), whom he loved, and concerning whom he had been expressly informed that in him should the promised seed be called, raised up, and developed. It was a powerful—a staggering test—but not unsuitable to the case of a man whom God was proposing to constitute the father of the family to whom He should give the everlasting inheritance of the earth in the ages of immortality and glory. He was not allowed to proceed to the full extremity of the test; but he was prepared, and proceeding to do so. His action was arrested when the purpose was served. The practical result of it is thus defined by God Himself: "By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, because thou hast done this thing and *hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me*—verse [12](#)—that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying, I will multiply thee as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is upon the sea shore, and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies. And in thy seed shall all nations of the earth be blessed because thou has obeyed my voice" ([Gen. 22:16–18](#)).

Now how could Abraham have been exalted to the great blessedness, of having the promises based upon the foundation of his individual obedience under great trial, without God showing His visible hand, and miraculously (as men talk) revealing to Abraham His will? No occurrence in nature could have served such a purpose: and no evolution of "Providence" would have given Abraham the distinct direction that was necessary to put his faith to so great a proof.

It may be said that in this, there is a barrier placed between us and Abraham, since we have no miraculous experience in the way of test. The barrier is only seeming. Though there has been no miraculous communication direct to us in a personal sense, we are the recipients of such communication in so far as the communications by the hand of Jesus and the apostles are intended for all who listen and receive them. These were as direct and miraculous as in the case of Abraham, and in many particulars, they contain the same elements of test as the offering up of Isaac, and were intended to have this effect as regards believers. Many of the commandments of Christ are of this test order. They put obedience to the proof and exercise us directly in the recognition of God and in practice of patience in preparation for exaltation. They are intended for no other purpose. When Christ commanded his disciples to resist not evil and to give way to the aggressor and to refrain from taking vengeance, it was not that it is in itself a good thing for the evil to have the upper hand, or the wicked to go unpunished. On the contrary, his purpose is in the end to destroy the evil and inflict direct vengeance on the offenders, even to the point of merciless extermination, and that too by the hand of the saints. But the command to his people meanwhile to submit to wrongful suffering, like sheep in the midst of wolves, and to return evil for evil to no man, is one of many ways in which the commandments of Christ lay the foundation of a tried and obedient faith in all those who submit to them, against the day of power and exaltation and glory.