

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Genesis 12:1-9

¹ Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵ Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot and all the possessions that they had gathered and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran, and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east, and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. ⁹ And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Commentary

Abram, through his obedience to God’s command, became the father of a great nation in Palestine. The travelogue in these verses has Abram and his entourage pass through the ancient city of Shechem where so much of Israel’s history would be played out. Yet he stopped there only long enough to receive an oracle from the Lord at the Oak of Moreh, a sacred grove. In response to the oracle’s promise that his descendants would receive the land, Abram paused long enough to build a shrine between the ancient Canaanite city of Bethel and Ai. The continued journey to the southern desert (verse 8), suggests that the land of promise would consist of far more than the central highlands of Palestine.

Reflection

Compare this story to the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. Which story reflects acting in the confidence of God’s provision and which represents arrogance and self-interest?

Romans 4:13-24

¹³ For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there transgression.

¹⁶ For this reason the promise depends on faith, in order that it may rest on grace, so that it may be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (who is the father of all of us, ¹⁷ as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"), in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸ Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So shall your descendants be." ¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), and the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰ No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²² Therefore "it was reckoned to him as righteousness." ²³ Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵ who was handed over for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Commentary

Converts to Judaism have no genealogy from Israel. Therefore, Pharisaic teaching gave them an artificial genealogy as children of Abraham, the first "convert" to the faith. In the present chapter Paul has just argued (4:1-12) that Abraham received God's justification because of his faith (Genesis 15:6) before he received the command to be circumcised (Genesis 17:10). Thus faith came before the command (law). The way in which the Gentiles share in the lineage of Abraham, therefore, is through faith, not through circumcision. In verses 23-25 Paul draws attention to the fact that Abraham, who lived before the law was given, was still able to gain righteousness through faith. As the father of the converts, who also do not have the Law of Moses, their father's ability to gain righteousness through faith is also possible for the offspring.

Reflection

How do you understand the role of law vs. faith for those who lived before the time of Moses?

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

⁹ As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

¹⁰ And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹² But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.”

¹⁸ While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” ¹⁹ And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. ²⁰ Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, ²¹ for she was saying to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” ²² Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And the woman was made well from that moment. ²³ When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, ²⁴ he said, “Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. ²⁵ But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. ²⁶ And the report of this spread through all of that district.

Commentary

Tax collecting in the Roman world was a legal system of graft in which the tax collector paid the taxes for his district and then received authority to raise whatever he could from the populace to recompense himself. The present story comes from Mark 2:13-17 with the invitation to “follow” Jesus representing an invitation to become Jesus’s student. Such an invitation shocked the Pharisees because the Pharisees considered tax collectors to be the worst kind of collaborators with the Roman occupiers. Unlike the Pharisaic teachers, however, Jesus did not recruit his students from among those who were Torah-observant but, rather, from among the sinners and “people of the land” (*‘am ha-arets*) who most needed his instruction.

Matthew 9:18-26 retells Mark’s stories of the healing of Jarius’ daughter and that of the woman with a flow of blood (Mark 5:21-43) with certain interesting differences. In Matthew, the ruler Jarius is unnamed (verse 18), and he reports that his daughter has died, asking Jesus to lay his hand on her despite her death in hopes of a cure. In Mark, the news of the child’s death comes while Jesus is en route to her house (Mark 5:35). The woman who touched Jesus clothing in Mark 5:24b-34 with the result that Jesus asks who touched him, does nothing of the sort in Matthew. Instead, the woman believes that she would be healed if she could touch his garment, and Jesus turns only to pronounce her cured (verse 22). Finally, in Mark, Jesus cured Jarius’s daughter by means of the Aramaic words *talitha cumi* (Mark 5:41), but in Matthew these possibly magic words are omitted.

Reflection

Do the differing versions of the same story in the gospels (for example, Matthew compared to Mark) add to, or detract from, your understanding of their message?

¹ Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous.

Praise befits the upright.

² **Praise the Lord with the lyre;**

make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.

³ Sing to him a new song;

play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.

⁴ **For the word of the Lord is upright,**

and all his work is done in faithfulness.

⁵ He loves righteousness and justice;

the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.

⁶ **By the word of the Lord the heavens were made**

and all their host by the breath of his mouth.

⁷ He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;

he put the deeps in storehouses.

⁸ **Let all the earth fear the Lord;**

let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him,

⁹ for he spoke, and it came to be;

he commanded, and it stood firm.

¹⁰ **The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;**

he frustrates the plans of the peoples.

¹¹ The counsel of the Lord stands forever,

the thoughts of his heart to all generations.

¹² **Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord,**

the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.