Praise be to God our Saviour in Jesus Christ

“*If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.*”

Luke 14:26-27

This is a very hard saying of Jesus. The word hate is strong. Anyone who fully understands what it means to carry a Roman cross knows that this is no easy yoke. If we consider the rest of the Bible, there seem to be contradictions here. The fifth commandment tells us to honor our mother and father. Wives are to be submissive to husbands and husbands are to honor their wives. Children are a blessing from the Lord. Family is the basic unit of society set up by God Himself. We are called to nourish our bodies and care for them as a temple of the Holy Spirit. Carrying a cross is a death sentence. And, we are called to be disciples of Christ.

Because the entire Bible is the word of God and is therefore entirely true, there are no contradictions. Therefore, we must look for the proper interpretation of this text.

Very simply, what it comes down to, is that Jesus must be first. A few extreme examples: In some religions, if a child, regardless of age, becomes a Christian, the parents will disown them. Jesus says, so be it. If a husband becomes a Christian and as a consequence his wife chooses to leave him, let her go. If becoming a Christian means that the rest of your family shuns you, that’s the way it has to be. If someone threatens you with death unless you renounce Christ, then it is time to die. Extreme examples, yet real, and faced daily by Christians throughout the world and Christian history.

Usually, loving Jesus more than others will affect daily decisions and suffering minor chiding or rejection. But even these are hard. And still, we must put Jesus first.

In Christ’s love

John

8-21-22

Genesis 12:1-3

At the end of the last chapter, we were introduced to Abram through the genealogy of Noah’s son, Shem. Abram’s father, Terah, had three sons and a daughter; all of whom became direct ancestors of King David and, of course, King Jesus. The book of Genesis devotes a lot of space to Abram because he is the one God established a covenant with that contained a promise of salvation to mankind.

God chose Abram to establish the Hebrew people who were designated as God’s chosen people. The people of Israel are still God’s chosen people, and in His own timing, God will bring His people to Himself through the Messiah, Jesus. Jesus is the answer to the promise made back in Genesis 3:15; Jesus is the seed of the woman who crushed the head of the serpent. Jesus has overcome satan, sin, and death. He is the means of salvation for sinful humanity.

It sometimes seems as if it takes a long time for God to act to save His people. The Almighty certainly has His good reasons for this and we may never know them all; but one of His reasons is to prove beyond doubt that humanity can’t save itself; humanity needs God to save them.

At the time of Abram, it has probably been close to 2000 years since creation. We saw how mankind simply spiraled down into evil and sin until there was only one who was still following God. God then sent the flood to have a reset starting with the family of Noah; the one man who was righteous by faith. Even with this new beginning, we can see how quickly mankind rebelled against God and went right back to doing evil. From all this, it is obvious what people will do and that for salvation, God needed to intervene.

Although God had been maintaining a line for the seed of the woman throughout all this time, He now established a covenant with a member of that line, Abram. Mankind couldn’t do it, so God has intervened in human affairs and established a covenant telling Abram what He will do. Notice in the first three verses of chapter 12 how often God says “I”; God tells Abram, and us, what He will do. In the last line of verse 3 God tells Abram that in him all the families of the earth will be blessed. Again, this is what God will do through Abram.

Looking ahead to the Exodus, about 600 years after Abraham, we see the next covenant God makes is the one He makes through Moses. Abram’s descendants have become a large people because God incubated them in Egypt. God Himself brought them out of Egypt and gave them the Law. In spite of God’s miraculous signs and wonders, and in spite of His promises of blessings, the rest of the Old Testament is a demonstration of their absolute inability to follow the Law. Once more proving that they can’t save themselves.

After another 1500 years, God sent His only begotten Son, Jesus, and offered the world the covenant of grace. The promise of Genesis 3:15 was fulfilled and the free gift of God’s salvation was offered to anyone who accepted the fact that we need saved and we cannot save ourselves. Many still reject this offer and remain determined that they don’t need God. Sometimes this refusal is blamed on satan or on the influence of the world, the person’s environment. The claim is that human-beings are basically good and are turned by outside forces. If not for these outside forces, people could save themselves.

God has one more time in store for the earth that will once again prove that mankind cannot save themselves and that they need God. It is called the millennial reign of Jesus Christ.

It has been about 2000 years since Jesus walked the earth and we are still waiting for His return. The Bible is very clear that He will come back. When He does, it will not be as a servant, but in power and great glory. He will return as a conqueror and He will be King of the entire world.

The book of Revelation lets us know that during the 1000 years of Jesus’ personal reign here on earth, satan will be locked up. He will have no access to the human race; he will not be able to interfere or tempt. Also, during Jesus’ earthy Kingdom, justice will prevail so the evil influence of the world will not be a factor. Jesus’ reign will be a time of peace unlike any other time.

You would think that after 1000 years of Jesus in control of the world, mankind would be past any desire to rebel against Him or God. But the human heart is truly evil. At the end of the thousand years, satan will once again be released and a huge part of the existing population will follow him to their destruction. Thus, proving once more that evil exists in the human heart and we desperately need salvation from God.

Presumably, Abram was doing just fine back in Ur of the Chaldeans. But then, in some way or another, Yahweh spoke to him and said, “*Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you.*” God is actually calling Abram to a drastic action. Put yourself in the position of Abram: What would it be like for you to be told to leave this area; abandon the house you live in; and separate from your family. Consider also that in Abram’s time there were no phones or internet or even mail service and traveling any distance was very time consuming. To leave your family like Abram was called to do meant that you would likely never see them again.

What we see here is that God demands complete devotion to Him and total obedience. This is hard for us to swallow; our fallen human nature fights against this; we deeply desire autonomy and we seek after our own comfort and wants. But this is where we count the cost, choose to submit to our Creator, and lay aside our desires if God calls us to something else; even to the point of putting our family in second place. As Jesus told us in Matthew 10:37, “*He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me*.”

This sounds harsh; and, in practice, it can be. But to put family or home or comfort before Jesus is idolatry. God is very clear that He does not tolerate idolatry. So, there is a spiritual element to things we do in the physical realm. It’s difficult for us to remember that, but it is important that we do; God is spirit and He created the physical. If we live with eternity in mind, the spiritual becomes far more important than the physical.

Most of us will never be called to do something as drastic as what Abram was called to do. But we daily face choices by which we can choose to honor God by putting Him first, or choose to put our own desires first.

None of this means we ignore our families or responsibilities or that we deny ourselves all pleasures in this life. Loving and caring for our families is God honoring because He created the family. Fulfilling our duties in work and life honors God because these are things we are called to do for the benefit of the societies He has established. God also created good things for us to enjoy on this earth; it is not wrong to partake of these things when we can. It’s just that in all things our devotion to God must be first.

The last line of verse 1 says, “*To the land which I will show you*.” God told Abram to leave all these things behind, yet He didn’t even tell Abram where he was going. Have you ever looked back in life and realized that God brought to this point and He never told you that that’s where you were heading? Rarely does God tell us where we are going. That is because our whole relationship with Him is based on faith. As we are told in Hebrews 11:6, “*And without faith it is impossible to please Him*.” At one point in the Gospel according to John, Jesus told Peter exactly what was expected of him; Jesus said, “*You follow Me*.”

This is something else that is hard for us to accept: God doesn’t owe us any explanations. He is the Creator and we are the created. Also, we messed up. It is only by His merciful overflowing grace that we can hope to be in His presence. We owe Him everything. Those words Jesus said to Peter should constantly echo in our own ears; Jesus is telling each of us individually, “*You follow Me*.”

Having considered all these things, as we look at verses 2 and 3, we also learn how much God loves us and cares for us. God has a plan and His plan will come to pass. Most of the time, God chooses to work through His creation, angels and people, to accomplish what He wants. And even though He works through us, we need to recognize that what we accomplish is by His hand. We don’t need any other reason to be His obedient servants than that He is God. But, He generously gives us so many more reasons.

In these two verses God gives Abram a sevenfold promise; and none of them are small. First, God promises to make Abram a great nation. The word “nation” here indicates both a large population and land. The people have to have a space to occupy; a place to call their own. Because Abram and Sarai are both old, this promise would require supernatural intervention, even though it would be taking place through them. That concept is very important to the promise of the seed of the woman. No mere man can crush the head of the serpent; that requires divine intervention.

Secondly, God tells Abram that He will bless him. For God to bless means to give abundant life to them. We know that Abram had great wealth and overall, his life was good. But this also carries into the spiritual realm. The Bible lets us know that Abram currently enjoys abundant life in heaven and will receive all the promises in full when God creates the new heaven and the new earth. Notice that the promise of abundant life does not mean that there will be no problems and that everything will be easy. This is still a fallen world we live in; there will be problems and those who follow Jesus will be actual targets of satan.

Next God tells Abram that He will make his name great. There is a kind of immortality in having a great name; a name that is well known throughout future history. The vast majority of names are forgotten within a very few generations. By the way, this is why it is so important to be sure God knows our name! Abraham’s name is well known and honored by millions of people. But most importantly, his name is great in heaven.

Fourthly, what an honor to know that you will be a blessing to others. This one may be little understood in today’s self-centered and even self-absorbed culture. But a key component to living a fulfilling life is to be a blessing to others. This is what the second greatest commandment is all about. And what a blessing Abram has turned out to be: From him has come the Saviour of the world. In him, all the nations of the world are blessed.

In promises five and six, God says He will bless those who bless Abram and curse those who curse him. This promise extends to all his offspring: Both physical Israel and his spiritual descendants; those who follow Christ. In the physical world, we can see this take place. I believe that the United States has received the blessings it has largely due to its historical support of Israel. I shudder to think of us turning our backs on them.

We can also look back through history and see that any nation that went against Israel has either been abolished or severely weakened in size and strength. Even those nations God used to punish Israel were later punished themselves for cursing the people of God. Today there are many nations that curse Israel. Because Israel has allowed itself to become primarily a secular nation, God allows those nations to thrive and be a problem to Israel. The time will come however, when God will take action and those nations also will pay the price for harassing God’s chosen.

That is also a promise we cling to as Christians; members of Abraham’s spiritual offspring; members of spiritual Israel. We do suffer at the hands of those who have nothing to do with God and curse us; but God will turn things about on them. It will be in His own timing and for His greatest glory; but if we stand strong in Christ, we will receive unimaginable blessings.

Lastly, God tells Abram that in him *all the families of the earth will be blessed.* This is, of course, the salvation offered in Jesus, the fulfillment of that promised seed of the woman. As we mentioned before, this is not universalism. This is open invitation to all human-beings everywhere to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Families refers to ethnicities. No matter one’s heritage, the glorious Gospel is available to them.

We know this promise is fulfilled. Revelation 7:9, “*After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands*.”

This is the promise we receive for our obedience to God: following Jesus Christ in faith; claiming Him and living as Him being our Saviour and Lord and King.

Prayer

Lord God, we can look at these seven promises You made to Your servant, Abram, and see that You have fulfilled them all without fail. All of them are beyond the will of man; they can only have come from You even though You worked through Your creation. Seven is a number of perfection; You are perfect God; we can believe Your perfect promises.

As we look back in Your word and see how You have been entirely faithful in fulfilling promises made to Your people; we now have the courage to believe the promises You have brought to us through Jesus Christ. How blessed we are to have received all these wonderful gifts, in addition to the salvation that we don’t deserve.

While we can truly do nothing for You and be of no benefit to You, we beg You the privilege of being Your servants. Use us to help others; may we be a blessing to those who serve You. May we be a light shining the Gospel to those who are perishing, that they may be encouraged to turn to You for salvation. We pray for Your Holy Spirit to help us to be the living sacrifices that You so richly deserve.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name

Amen