



Sola Fide

Reformation



2017: Reforming-Transforming



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Answering the hard questions in the steps of Abraham.

by Janice Hilton

After ten months of unemployment, I was finally being offered a great job. But there were strings attached — more like one big rope. Accepting this job required that I uproot my life and move twelve hundred miles north. Thinking of leaving everything and everyone I knew and going to an unknown environment, with a change in climate, terrain, and social norms, I was left with one big question: How can I know if this is the right thing to do?

At times in each of our lives we face big questions. Do any of these resonate with you?

I'm unhappy with my circumstances. Do I make an effort to change them or learn to live with them? Would a change be better? How can I know?

The doctor has given me a

daunting prognosis, and I've got to decide among several options. Which will be best? How can I know?

Someone has made me a promise, and it's an important one. Can I trust them? How can I know?

When that question takes over your life, what do you usually do? I hope you know people who can give you wise counsel. But when it comes down to it, the decisions in your life are your responsibility. And you want to be the one to make them. That's the fun of being alive, of being an adult: We get to have a say in what our lives become. At times, though, it can be overwhelming.

Old Testament lesson

A story in the Old Testament includes the very question we

ask when we face these challenges.

Before he became Abraham, Abram received some promises from God. In Genesis 15 God made him two fundamental vows. The first was “a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir” (v. 4). God had already promised Abram that he would become a great nation and be blessed. But you can’t become a great nation if you have no children. So Abram expressed his concerns to God: “I remain childless” (v. 2).

God’s promise of a child became a seminal moment, not just for Abram but for all believers everywhere throughout time. “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (v. 6). God said it, Abram believed it, and that settled it. The apostle Paul makes much of this principle in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. Our hope and salvation are not based on works, but on faith.

But the conversation did not end with this pledge. God went on to promise Abram an inheritance of land. Abram’s response was more like mine: “Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?” (v. 8). Those familiar words: *How can I know?* It’s encouraging to know that the heroes of our faith had the same concerns we do.

God’s response to this question was unusual, even puzzling. He instructed Abram to gather a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a pigeon. Abram was not puzzled by this instruction. Without being told, he knew exactly what to do with them. He cut the animals in half and laid them with the birds opposite each other. Abram fell into a deep sleep, and

while he was sleeping, a smoking fire pot and blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. Genesis 15:18 says, “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I give this land. . . .’”

Cutting a covenant

While this scene seems bizarre to us, it made perfect sense to Abram. And thanks to archeology, we can now appreciate what he experienced. Documents going back to the Hittite

agreements throughout the Old Testament. In this case, He used type 3.

The Hittite documents then describe the process of ratification that involved cutting an animal. Hence the term cutting a covenant. The superior party was in essence saying, “If I do not keep this promise, may my life be like that of these animals.” Jeremiah 34:8-22 confirms the prevalence of this custom. Thirteen hundred years after Abram, the same ritual was in use.

This promise must have been

“The decisions in your life are your responsibility.”

culture, Abram’s contemporaries, describe the terms of cutting a covenant between two parties. These documents describe three types of covenants that were generally made:

- agreements between equals drawn up to outline the expectations of each in a specific situation;
- agreements between a superior and an inferior outlining the expectations between each regarding a specific situation;
- a grant or promissory covenant obligating a superior to do something for the inferior.

There is ample evidence of God using the second and third

affirming to Abram, given his cultural understanding of the situation. But, in truth, how meaningful was this promise, if the One who made it cannot die but gives all to keep His promises?

New Testament application

The power behind the gospel is this: God did die. By His death, Jesus, the Son of God, died to ratify a new covenant with all who will believe. Romans 3:25 says, “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood — to be received by faith.” And just as Abram believed God, so we must believe God.

When we believe, as Abram did, we will be accounted as righteous. Then all the promises of the New Testament apply to us. Like Abram, when we are at a loss to understand our circumstances, we can with confidence take steps to gain clarity.

Abram couldn't see his future. He took stock of his circumstances and assessed that his inheritance would be left to a servant. You too, when unable to see your future, can stop and assess your circumstances. Do the research, do the math, take the

them to pray for your clarity and discernment.

Perhaps this process will reveal some steps you need to take. Like Abram, take these steps without question. Take them diligently and completely. Be as obedient to the promptings of God as your understanding allows, continually looking to Him for guidance and further clarity.

Sleep on it, as Abram did. His sleep was part of God's communication tool. It may well be a useful step toward your sense of clarity. A good night's sleep

“The heroes of our faith had the same concerns we do.”

time to think through your alternatives. Then talk to God about it, as Abram did. This alone may reveal the direction you seek.

The process may involve taking counsel from the godly people in your life. Proverbs 15:22 says, “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.” And the apostle Paul encourages us to “Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Turn to those you trust and let them help you think through your situation. Engage

— several nights of sound sleep — may help clear your mind of distractions and open you to a sense of God's direction.

Checklist

And without fail, continue to pray. God has made you a significant guarantee outlined in Philippians 4:6, 7: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your

hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

How can you know? God has made you a guarantee, one that He gave His life to validate. When you face challenges and are left wondering “How can I know?” don't be anxious. Instead, bring your concerns to Jesus. When you give Him the opportunity by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, He can and will direct your life.

Troubled about what to do? Pray, pray again, then pray some more, always with thanksgiving. When the peace of God comes, as it will — that's His promise — it will come with a sense of direction. The answer may not be the one you'd hoped for. But if it's the direction that gives you His peace, it will be His answer.

The answer will be in God's timing. If it doesn't come quickly, keep in mind that this situation consuming you at the moment may just be the beginning of a new chapter in your relationship with God. This situation may put you on a road that will lead to a deeper, richer love for Him and for others.

You are in a covenant relationship with God. He shed His own blood to guarantee His promises to you. It is His desire to draw close to you so that you can understand His heart and be transformed by the circumstances He brings into your life. ☒

Janice Hilton writes from Puyallup, WA. Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

