

“THE AUTHOR OF SALVATION”

Tonight we are studying the passage that serves as the transition from the section of Genesis in which God’s dealings are with all mankind to the section in which he focuses in on the first generations of the people of Israel, his elect people. As you know, the doctrine of election is problematic for some Christians. This is the doctrine which says that God, from all eternity, out of his mere good pleasure, chose to save some people from the estate of sin and misery and chose not to save others. Some argue that this doctrine is unfair, or that it violates man’s free will, or that it is inconsistent with God’s loving character. And others who are less strongly opposed to election nevertheless contend that it is a doctrine that can safely be set aside as a non-essential element of the Christian faith. The problem with those ways of handling this doctrine, though, is that they fail to deal honestly with both the biblical data and human experience. Such was the observation of John Newton, the 18th century minister and author of the beloved hymn “Amazing Grace.” In one of his letters, Newton writes the following:

“I have met with some sincere people, as I believe, who have told me they could not bear to read [Paul’s] 9th chapter to the Romans, but always passed it over: so that their prejudices against election, prejudiced them against a part of the Scripture likewise. But why so, unless because the dreaded doctrine is maintained too plainly to be evaded?...Let us judge then...from experience...Let me appeal to yourself. I think you know

yourself too well to say, that you either sought or loved the Lord first: perhaps you are conscious, that for a season, and so far as in you lay, you even resisted his call; and must have perished, if he had not made you willing in the day of his power, and saved you in defiance of yourself... [W]e are assured that the broad road, which is thronged with the greatest multitudes, leads to destruction. Were not you and I in this road? Were we better than those who continue in it still? What has made us differ from our former selves? Grace. What has made us differ from those who are now as we once were? Grace. Then this grace by the very terms, must be differentiating, or distinguishing grace; that is, in other words, electing grace.” [*Letters*, pp. 72-73]

Distinguishing grace; differentiating grace; electing grace. - it is a theme that runs throughout the Bible. And it is a theme that is especially evident in the book of Genesis. God accepted Abel’s sacrifice, but rejected Cain’s. God bestowed his favor upon Noah, but sent his judgment against the rest of the world. God was the God of Shem, but not of Ham or Japheth. God conferred the blessings of the covenant upon Isaac, but not Ishmael. God loved Jacob, but hated Esau. And here in Genesis 11, God prepared the way for Abram, later to be renamed Abraham, to be a recipient of his distinguishing grace.

The passage begins by tracing the line of Shem's descendants up to Terah and his three sons, Abram, Nahor, and Haran. We are given very little information about the individuals in between Shem and Abram's father, Terah, and this lays an emphasis upon the fact that the blessing that Noah pronounced upon Shem in chapter 9 will rest upon Abram. Once again, God's plan of salvation is focusing in on one family out of all the families of the earth. But why Abram? Was he more righteous than others? Was he more righteous than the other descendants of Shem? Let's see what our text has to say about that.

Verse 28 tells us that Terah and his family first lived in Ur of the Chaldeans. Ur was a large and important city in southern Babylonia, about 200 miles southeast of the present-day city of Baghdad in Iraq. The people of Ur worshipped the Sumerian moon god, a god named Nanna. Now, it is important to realize that in the ancient world, people had a concept of religion that is very different than the concept that is held by most of the people in our culture. In our culture, a person's religion is typically considered a private matter. Religion is generally relegated to the private sphere of life. Of course we as biblical Christians should not buy into that notion, because the Scriptures call us to honor and glorify the Lord in all that we do, in all spheres of life. Still, this is the prevailing view in our age. Religion is considered a private matter. But it was not so in the ancient world. In ancient cultures, religion was intertwined with all aspects of life: with commerce, with agriculture, with marriage and family life, with civic design, with entertainment, and much more. For this reason, it would have been extremely difficult to

live among a group of people and not worship the gods that they worshipped. And we know that Terah and his family worshipped the gods of Ur. In Joshua 24:2, the Lord says to the people of Israel: “Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.” Abram and his family participated in the idolatry of Ur.

So it is clear that Abram was no better than the others around him. In fact, he was worse. For he was a descendent of Shem, and God was the God of Shem, as Noah declared in chapter 9. Not only was Abram an idolater, he was an apostate. He had turned away from the true God to worship idols. Now we do not know how this came about. More likely than not, the descendants of Shem slowly drifted away from the Lord due to a combination of factors over time: older generations neglected their duty of passing on the true faith and younger generations spurned the religion of their fathers in favor of the idolatries of the age. As much as the Lord desires covenant families to train up covenant children to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ on into adulthood, it is a sad fact of history that, for a variety of reasons, it does not always turn out that way. One of Jonathan Edwards’ most famous descendants was his grandson Aaron Burr, Jr., but he was not famous for his piety. Burr was Vice President of the United States during Thomas Jefferson’s presidency. He is most famously known for taking offense at remarks written about him by Alexander Hamilton and challenging him to a duel in which Hamilton was shot and killed. By all accounts, Burr was not a godly man. His story, the story of countless others like it, and the story of how the descendants of Shem

ended up worshipping the moon in an ancient Babylonian city stands as a warning for us all. It reminds us of the great pressure that we face from the idolatrous culture around us, and it shows us the very real danger of apostasy.

But the good news is that the Lord is able to produce faith where it does not exist. He has the power to turn people away from idols and cause them to serve the living and true God. And that is what he did in the case of Abram. As Stephen said in his speech in the book of Acts, “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’” [Acts 7:2-3] Now it is not necessary for us to think that the knowledge of the one true God was utterly unknown to Abram prior to that call. It is likely that some information about the Lord had been passed down from his ancestors. He may have been in a situation similar to a person today who hails from generation after generation of nominal Roman Catholics, the kind of person who knows bits and pieces about the Christian faith, but whose overall religious outlook is shaped by superstitions, personal preferences, and the dominant ideals of the surrounding culture. We might say that such a person has some knowledge of the true God, but it is certainly not a saving knowledge of the gospel. Perhaps Abram’s religious outlook was similar to that. He had some knowledge of the God of the Bible, but he had turned aside to worship gods of human devising. Now, if you have ever tried to witness to someone like this, you know how difficult it is. It is almost as though the little bit of exposure that the person has had to the Christian faith functions like an

inoculation, so that they are immune to the true gospel. In all likelihood, that was the kind of person Abram was before God called him. The greatest obstacle to Abram serving the true God was Abram himself.

But just look at what the Lord did in Abram's life. Not only did he come into his life at just the right moment and call him to a living faith, but he kept his sovereign hand over the line of Shem from generation to generation for the sake of what he was going to do in Abram's life. From one generation to the next, God had the birth of Abram in view. Have you ever thought about this? Have you considered your own heritage from this perspective? Regardless of whether your parents or grandparents worshipped the Lord, the fact that you are a Christian means that God had you in mind even before your parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents were even born. He chose you in Christ before the foundation of the world. And he saves his chosen ones, even when they are worshipping the moon in ancient Babylon.

Our text mentions one other fact that lays an emphasis upon God's sovereignty in the plan of salvation. It tells us that Sarai, Abram's wife, was barren. If you are familiar with Genesis, you know that this fact becomes very important as the story of Abram develops. God promises to make a great nation out of Abram, but his wife cannot have children. And this theme is repeated in the lives of many of the other patriarchs as well. Why is this? Why did God insist upon working out his covenant promise through people who were unable to bear children? The idolatrous people around Abram had no trouble having children. They were filling up the earth. But Abram, the one through whom God

promises to bless the world, the one through whose line the Savior of the world will be born, Abram and his wife are childless. Why? Because God wanted to make it abundantly clear that salvation comes from him, and not from us. He is the author of salvation.

Abram was not saved because of anything within himself. He was not saved because he was better than the other people of his time. He was saved for the same reason that you and I and everyone else who has faith in Christ have been saved – because of the differentiating grace of God; the electing grace of God. The reason why God called Abram, and the reason why Abram responded to that call in faith, is because Abram was one of the people for whom Christ died on the cross. He was one of God's elect people. Jesus did not die for the sins of everyone, but only for the sins of the elect. This is the doctrine, closely related to that of election, that is sometimes described as "limited atonement." And it is a glorious doctrine. Were this doctrine not true, then we would be forced to conclude that the cross of Christ did not actually secure forgiveness for anyone's sins, but it only made forgiveness possible. And that would be a terrifying prospect. Listen to J. Gresham Machen:

“People say that Calvinism is a dour, hard, creed. How broad and comforting, they say, is the doctrine of a universal atonement, the doctrine that Christ died equally for all men there upon the cross! How narrow and harsh, they say, is this Calvinistic doctrine – one of the ‘five points’ of

Calvinism – this doctrine of the ‘limited atonement,’ this doctrine that Christ died for the elect of God in a sense in which He did not die for the unsaved!

But do you know, my friend, it is surprising that men say that. It is surprising that they regard the doctrine of a universal atonement as being a comforting doctrine. In reality it is a very gloomy doctrine indeed... To say that Christ died for all men alike and that then not all men are saved, to say that Christ died for humanity simply in the mass, and that the choice of those who out of that mass are saved depends upon the greater receptivity of some as compared with others – that is a doctrine that takes from the gospel much of its sweetness and much of its joy... Thank God we can say every one, as we contemplate Christ upon the cross, not just: ‘He died for the mass of humanity, and how glad I am that I am amid that mass,’ but: ‘He loved me and gave Himself for me; my name was written from all eternity upon His heart, and when He hung and suffered there on the cross He thought of men, even me, as one for whom in His grace He was willing to die.’” [*God Transcendent*, 147-8]

Thank God for his differentiating grace.