

# **Wisdom for Life**



# Wisdom for Life

52 Old Testament Meditations

Michael P. V. Barrett



Reformation Heritage Books  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

*Wisdom for Life*

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**Reformation Heritage Books**

3070 29th St. SE

Grand Rapids, MI 49512

616-977-0889

orders@heritagebooks.org

www.heritagebooks.org

*Printed in the United States of America*

21 22 23 24 25 26/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Barrett, Michael P. V., 1949- author.

Title: Wisdom for life : 52 Old Testament meditations / Michael P. V. Barrett.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Reformation Heritage Books, [2021]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021038791 (print) | LCCN 2021038792 (ebook) | ISBN 9781601789006 (paperback) | ISBN 9781601789013 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Old Testament—Meditations.

Classification: LCC BS1151.55 .B37 2021 (print) | LCC BS1151.55 (ebook) | DDC 221.071—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021038791>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021038792>

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# Out of the Curse Comes Grace

GENESIS 3:15

Genesis 3:15 is often called the protevangelium, or the first gospel. The Lord said, “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” This verse certainly highlights the beauty of grace: as soon as man needed it, God announced the gospel. But this grace goes far beyond just answering man’s need. Although salvation is certainly good for man, it is ultimately more about God’s glory than man’s good. The strategic placement of this first gospel message in the threefold-curse pronouncement highlights this truth. Rather than being directed to man, this first declaration of the gospel is part of the curse against the serpent, Satan himself. Man would certainly benefit, but God’s glory was the issue. The serpent’s defeat and man’s salvation were the means of declaring that glory. This short verse suggests three thoughts about the gospel.

## **God’s Idea**

The text emphasizes the Lord’s sovereign, nonnegotiable resolve in declaring His purpose and means of reversing the curse: “I will put.” The almighty God demonstrated His power and resolve to destroy a being who was His inferior but nevertheless His archenemy. Satan stood no chance against God; the devil’s doom was sealed from the beginning. God also demonstrated His sovereign grace by promising a Savior for cursed people who deserved wrath and condemnation.

His justice sentenced the race to death; His wondrous grace devised the means whereby the banished might not be expelled (see 2 Sam. 14:14). Even this first general promise of salvation warrants Micah's question of praise and wonder: "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity?" (Mic. 7:18).

### **God's Plan**

This text declares not only what God's grace will do in reversing the curse but also how God will accomplish it. The first thing the Lord would do was change the relationship between the woman and the serpent. The woman had agreed with Satan against God; now grace would reconcile her to God. In Genesis 3, the woman is specifically Eve. Therefore, the statement testifies to God's grace in saving the very one who had led her husband to disobey the terms of the covenant. This enmity was not an aversion to snakes; it was an awakened conscience that recognized the lie of the serpent and attracted the heart back to God.

The second thing the Lord would do was enlarge the scope of that enmity between the seed of the serpent and the Seed of the woman. Grasping this requires understanding the significance of the word "seed" and identifying the referents to the two seeds.

This gets a little complicated, but thinking it through proves rewarding. Part of the problem is that although the word for "seed" is singular, it can have a collective as well as a purely singular sense. In any given context we have to determine whether the writer has in mind a singular or plural idea. I suggest that Genesis 3:15 includes both a collective sense in regard to the serpent's seed and a singular sense in regard to the woman's Seed. The seed of the serpent would refer to all those who, untouched by grace, retain Eve's preconversion hostility to God and affinity to Satan. It refers to all sinners, who in their natural state are the enemies of God. Obviously they are related to Satan spiritually and not physically. This is an association made in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus said that the Jews were unable to understand Him and refused to believe Him because they were of their father the devil (John 8:44). Similarly, the apostle John



declares that those who are given over to the practice of sin are “of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning” (1 John 3:8). The serpent’s offspring are the race of unconverted sinners.

The woman’s Seed, however, is a singular identity and brings us to the One who is the real enemy of Satan and the only Savior of sinners. The woman’s Seed is the promised Christ. That He is identified as the woman’s Seed hints of the miraculous virgin birth and most certainly declares that the Savior will be part of the human race. As a real man, He will reverse the curse of sin. There can be little doubt that Paul had this text in mind when he declared that in the fullness of time God sent His Son, “made of a woman” (Gal. 4:4). This first promise of a Savior makes it clear that the Savior must be a man. That Christ came to destroy the works of the devil expresses the open hostility between Him and Satan (see 1 John 3:8). Indeed, Hebrews 2:14 says that Christ became flesh so that He could “through death...destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil.”

### **God’s Intent**

The final statement of Genesis 3:15 reveals God’s purpose by predicting the outcome of the hostility: “It shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” The victory of the woman’s Seed over the serpent is absolutely guaranteed. The outcome is that the head of the serpent will be bruised. The word “bruise” literally carries the idea of crushing. *Crushing the head is fatal*. So the Lord Jesus effectively defeated and destroyed the devil. The New Testament identifies this fatal crushing with Christ’s work on the cross, with the operation of the church, and with the end times. The Lord Jesus links the casting out of the prince of the world and His being lifted up from the earth (a reference to the cross) in the same context (John 12:31–32). Paul alludes to this verse when he assures the Roman church that “the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly” (Rom. 16:20). The final outcome is at the end of time when Satan is bound and ultimately cast into the lake of fire forever (Rev. 20:3, 10).

That the serpent will bruise the heel of the woman's Seed suggests the ineffectiveness of the serpent to frustrate or alter the mission of Christ. *Crushing the heel is futile*. Some interpreters see this as referring to the cross, but I am not so inclined. Genesis 3:15 points to the cross, but not in this part of the verse. It is far better to see the cross in the declaration that the serpent's head will be crushed. Even if the heel crushing does predict the cross, Satan's objective in the death of Christ was hampered and overruled. Ironically, what he intended for his ultimate victory became his ultimate defeat. The cross was not Satan's blow against Christ; it was Christ's ultimate death blow against Satan. Paul said in no uncertain terms that the cross of Christ was the means of disarming and humiliating all powers and authorities, including Satan, and publicly triumphing over them (Col. 2:15). The cross of Christ was not God's making the best of a situation generated by the devil; it was the climax of His eternal plan to redeem fallen and needy sinners.

It may be that the word "crush" in this statement actually derives from another root, a homonym meaning "to snap at." A *homonym* is a word that sounds identical to another but is a completely different word (e.g., there/their). If this is the root, it intensifies the total futility of all Satan's annoying efforts to prevent the inevitable from occurring. If crushing a heel is futile, snapping at the heels is even more so. The evidence of the New Testament is that Satan tried everything he could to kill Christ before He could make the eternally planned atonement. From moving Herod to kill the children in hopes of murdering Jesus, to attempting to discredit Christ during the temptation, to attempting to have the crowds stone Him, to fiercely attacking Him in the garden of Gethsemane on the eve of His crucifixion, Satan was constantly nipping and snapping at Christ's heels. But he could not frustrate God's plan to reverse the curse of sin by the Seed of the woman.

This first gospel message does not reveal all the details about Christ that we know. But it does guarantee the Savior and sets the groundwork for more revealing truths. Every other revelation about Christ fits nicely within the sphere of this first promise. Eve did not

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know how it would all work out, but her faith in and anticipation of God's promise were so intense that she thought for a slight moment that the birth of her first son, Cain, was the promised Seed. Genesis 4:1 contains some translation difficulties, but it could fairly be rendered, "I have acquired a man, even Jehovah." It was a brief case of mistaken identity, but it suggests that saved Eve was looking for the right one. We want to follow her example in this.

## Lessons in Saving Faith from Abraham

GENESIS 12–25

“Father knows best.” Recognition of the truth of that statement increases with age. Had I always taken the counsel of my father, I would have avoided many of the mistakes that I made. God has given us fathers for us to honor and to obey and from whom we are to learn.

Abraham served many roles in his long life. He was the friend of God; he was faithful Abraham; he was Father Abraham. God, indeed, had chosen him particularly for this purpose. The Lord said that He chose Abraham in order that he would “command his children and his household” that they would “keep the way of the LORD” (Gen. 18:19). He was father to Ishmael and to Isaac, but the New Testament specifically marks him as the father of the faithful—to all those who believe the gospel. Every believer is indeed the seed of Abraham (Rom. 4:11–13; Gal. 3:29). The lessons and the example that Abraham taught and set before Ishmael and Isaac are as relevant for us as they were for them. So as obedient children, we should take our place at the feet of Father Abraham and learn some lessons, particularly about faith.

Father Abraham was faithful Abraham, and he establishes a pattern of faith to follow. He serves as the exemplary recipient of the God-given righteousness that comes by faith. His whole life demonstrates a commitment not to material values—for he was a stranger and a pilgrim—but to the spiritual side of life, for he

desired that better, heavenly city (Heb. 11:8–10). He teaches us that faith is necessary both for salvation and for life: “The just shall live by faith.” Abraham was not a man of faith because of personal worth or merit; he was what he was by grace. The same is true for all who are his seed. A survey of Father Abraham’s inspired biography highlights important lessons about faith.

The first lesson concerns saving faith. Faith marks the beginning of spiritual life. Along with repentance, its counterpart, faith, is the consequence of regeneration, that gracious divine act that imparts life to dead sinners enabling them to believe. When Abraham first heard and responded to God’s gracious call, he was living in Ur as much a sinner and idolater as the rest of the population (Josh. 24:2). His faith did not merit favor with God; on the contrary, God’s gracious choice of Abraham set him on the whole course of faith. Faith is not the cause of God’s saving grace but the evidence of it and the instrument by which it is received.

Although Genesis does not record Abraham’s conversion experience, it does declare the fact of his justifying faith in a statement that becomes a proof text for justification by faith alone in New Testament theology (Rom. 4:3). Genesis 15:6 is the key text: “And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.” Here is a more literal translation that will help put some things in focus: “And he was believing in the LORD, and He regarded it to him—that is, righteousness.” The key exegetical question here is to what “it” refers. Resisting every temptation to address the technicalities of Hebrew grammar, I will say simply that the “it” refers to righteousness and not the fact of believing. The word “righteousness” is isolated grammatically from the main clause as a means of special focus. The point is that it is by faith, not because of it, that God regards or imputes righteousness to Abraham. Although faith is the right thing to do, it is not itself the righteousness. Theologically, in justification God imputes the righteousness of Christ, which is received by faith alone. The grammar of this verse expresses the doctrine precisely and highlights three important lessons about saving faith.

## **Faith Is Objective**

Faith is not dreaming or wishing that somehow all will be well. The value of faith is not in its exercise but in its object. Biblical and saving faith is objective. Saving faith saves because of what is believed, not the act of believing. The object of faith determines the value of faith.

This classic text draws attention clearly to the object of Abraham's faith. It was personal and propositional. The personal component is expressly stated: He believed in the Lord. The King James Version's rendering of this name in upper case letters identifies it clearly as the personal name of God. He is Jehovah or Yahweh. This name communicates God's aseity, His eternity, and His absolute sovereignty. But perhaps most significant is the association this name has with the covenant promise; He is the God of grace. He is the Savior of His people. Jeremiah's contrast between the cursed man and the blessed man makes it unequivocally clear that it is the object of faith and not just the exercise of faith that saves. The same word for "trust" characterizes both. He who puts his trust and confidence in the Lord and rejects trust and confidence in self or others is blessed (see Jer. 17:5–8). The object makes all the difference. So Father Abraham teaches his children that Jehovah is the only Savior. Or as Paul said, "Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed" (Rom. 10:11).

Abraham's faith is also propositional; it stands on the promise. Faith is not make-believe; it rests confidently on God's word: "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). What Abraham knew and believed about God was a matter of revelation. The verses immediately preceding this great faith text focus on the promised Seed. The Old Testament's "Seed theology" is richly complex but ultimately Christocentric. Every believer is Abraham's seed; yet at the heart of God's promise to Abraham was the coming of one Seed who would be the source of universal blessing (Gen. 12:3). Paul put it this way: "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Gal. 3:16). Abraham received the good news (the gospel) of a promised Christ. That's what he believed to the saving of his soul. That is the lesson about

saving faith that we must learn. Abraham rejoiced to see Christ's day (John 8:56), and so do all who are of his seed.

### **Faith Is Conscious**

Saving faith is a deliberate act of the heart, which biblically designates the mind, the affections, and the will. The verb "believed" in Genesis 15:6 is most instructive. The basic meaning of the simple form of the verb means "to be firm or reliable." When we say "amen," we are using this Hebrew word. The particular form of the verb that occurs here is a declarative. To believe the Lord, therefore, means to declare, recognize, acknowledge, or confess that the Lord is firm, reliable, and dependable. To believe is to regard the Lord as trustworthy, and consequently to rest on Him and to take Him at His word. This kind of faith is exclusive. It entails a rejection of anything and everything else as the ground of hope. Saving faith is a receiving and resting on Christ alone as He is offered in the gospel (see Westminster Shorter Catechism 86). It is total dependence on Him for life. Abraham illustrates well the new way of thinking and behaving that marks genuine saving faith. He rejected and turned from his idolatry and old life to trust solely in the Lord and His word. He left Ur not knowing exactly where he was going but convinced that he had no other option but to trust the Lord. This is always the issue of saving faith: to acknowledge that there is no hope or help other than Jesus Christ. To trust Jesus Christ as the only way, hope, and life (see John 14:6) is saving faith. Abraham teaches us to regard Jesus as the Great Amen.

### **Faith Is Constant**

The narrative does not record the moment of Abraham's conversion experience, but it does record the evidence of it. Remembering the crisis moment of initial saving faith in Jesus is not the issue; resting in the present experience and consciousness of it is. The apostle John explains this clearly: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:12). The tense sequence is vital. "Received" is a form

of verb that simply indicates the fact of the action; “believe” is a form of verb that expresses the habitual exercise of the action. In other words, the evidence of having received Christ is the present, habitual exercise of faith. Believing proves the conversion experience. Abraham’s faith illustrates the truth.

Although the translation of Genesis 15:6 says that “he believed,” the construction in Hebrew specifically indicates that “he had been and was believing.” This verse, therefore, does not refer to Abraham’s conversion experience but rather to the ongoing experience of his converted life. Years later, the prophet Habakkuk would say, “The just shall live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4). The New Testament’s commentary on that statement makes clear that it refers both to initial faith as the means of justification and to the life of faith as the means of sanctification and all of Christian living. So Father Abraham teaches us that saving faith cannot be relegated to a moment in the past but rather is a persevering faith that never stops believing. There were times when Abraham’s faith was weak and sight prevailed (as we will see), but he never reneged on the Lord.

So the first lesson to learn as we sit at the feet of Father Abraham is to set aside all confidence in self and effort and to rely in faith on God’s grace for salvation. “Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all” (Rom. 4:16).