

LEARNING TO TAKE GOD AT HIS WORD

John M. Sinclair

We can often learn much about a biblical character by the first words of his that are recorded in God's Word. God's first recorded words are, "Let there be light," which emphasizes that "God is light, and there is no darkness in Him" (1 John 1:5). Christ's first recorded words in His incarnate state are, "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" That reminds us that His primary purpose in coming to earth was to glorify the Father by doing His will (John 6:38; 17:4).

On the other hand, Satan's first recorded words are: "Did God say . . ."— that is, "you *think* God said that, but are you sure you got it straight?" That reveals a tactic that Satan uses very frequently to lead people into temptation. He doesn't deny outright that God said what He said, nor suggest knowingly disobeying God's commands, as either of those would make it too obvious that his words are a temptation. Instead, he suggests doubts that we have properly understood God's commands and instructions, though they seemed perfectly clear to us *until* he suggested that we'd misunderstood. It is therefore a very important lesson, in winning victory over temptation, to learn to take God entirely at His word because when God speaks, He means exactly what He says.

The Scriptures often point to Abraham as a great example of faith; they tell us that "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness" (Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23). However, in order for Abraham to become such an example of faith, he first had to *unlearn* the tendency to put interpretations on God's Word so as to make them say something other than their obvious meaning, and learn to take God exactly at His word. The interpretations that Abraham put on God's Word were according to an unwritten law code, known as Nuzu (or Nuzi) law, which was observed throughout the biblical world of his day.

When God first called Abraham, He told him to leave his country and *all* his relatives behind (Genesis 12:1); but Abraham took Lot, his nephew, with him (verse 5). Why would he do that? He and his wife, Sarah, were childless. Nuzu law said that, if a man had no children, but had a male relative who was *young enough* to be his son, he could treat that relative as a son and make him heir of his heritage. God's promise of Genesis 12:3 required that Abraham have a son, or someone whom he could treat as a son; so he doubtless interpreted God's promise as meaning that he'd have descendants of such a male relative, who would form a great nation. Lot, being Abraham's nephew, would have met that qualification of Nuzu law.

Before long, however, it became necessary for Abraham and Lot to separate because their servants weren't getting along (Genesis chapter 13). That was God's way of saying, "No, Abraham. When I said I'd give you a *son*, I didn't mean a relative whom you could *treat* as a son. I promised to give you a *son*, and I meant exactly that."

A second occasion when Abraham was tempted with such a doubt, was when he asked God, "Lord GOD, what wilt Thou give me, seeing I am going on childless, and he who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" Nuzu law said that if a childless man had servants, he was allowed to treat the servant who had the greatest seniority as a son. Abraham's servant with the greatest seniority was Eliezer. Yet God's answer in verse 4 made it very clear that, when He promised a *son*, He did *not* mean the servant with the most seniority. He replied, "He shall not be your heir; but he who shall come out of your own body will be your heir."

One more time when Abraham was subject to the same kind of doubt, was when he took Sarah's suggestion to have a son by her maid, Hagar— which resulted (Genesis chapter 16). Though that idea probably shocks us the most of the three, it had certain logic in it, as Ishmael *did* come from his body, which could not be said of either Lot or Eliezer. However, Ishmael was not a son of *Sarah*, as wanted to give him. In that way of seeking a son, Abraham was again following Nuzu law, which said that if a childless man's wife had a maid, he was allowed to try to have a son by the maid; and if that worked, he could make that son his heir. Often the maid would literally give birth on the wife's knees, to create an illusion for her as though *she* were giving birth to the child (Genesis 30:3). Yet the need to send Hagar and Ishmael away (Genesis chapter 21) clearly showed that God didn't want that method used; in fact, God doubtlessly abhorred such a method of bringing children into the world.

Those certainly must have been hard lessons for Abraham to learn; but he eventually learned them. And when he had thoroughly gotten it through his system that when God speaks, He means exactly what He says— what happened? God came to visit him in visible form, which we believe to have been Christ in a pre-incarnate state, accompanied by two angels (Genesis 18:1-15). There is a particular significance in the time of day when these heavenly visitors came.

Remember that, when Adam and Eve had sinned because they had allowed themselves to doubt whether God meant what He said— He came to them during the *cool* of the day (Genesis 3:8)— that is, the evening. Of course God, being a Spirit, wouldn't *really* suffer from either heat or cold. That presentation of His coming is what we call “anthropomorphism”— that is, a description of God as though He were a man, with human characteristics, in order to help us grasp more of His nature and character. That account is saying that, when Adam and Eve had sinned because they'd failed to take God at His word, God didn't particularly relish their company, so He waited till a comfortable time of the day to come to them.

On the other hand, when Abraham had thoroughly learned to take God exactly at His word, we read of God's coming with the two angels to visit him during the *heat* of the day (Genesis 18:1). It was a representation of God as treasuring fellowship with Abraham so much that He considered it worth enduring the heat of the day (which can be *very* hot in Bible lands), to enjoy it.

How thoroughly have *we* learned to take God exactly at His word? Or, do we need to *unlearn* the tendency to interpret God's Word according to popular beliefs and practices, so as to make it say something quite different from the obvious meaning? Have we gotten it thoroughly through our systems that, when God speaks, He means exactly what He says? That's the key to God's treasuring fellowship with us.
