



GREAT MEN OF ANTIQUITY

Course 3, *The People of Destiny*, Lesson 1

The Problem: The Bible presents the stories of many great men and women of God whose lives continue to inspire and encourage us. Yet, it can be surprising to realize that these holy individuals were, in many ways, just like us—human, flawed, and prone to failure. At times, they fell into grievous sins. This raises an important question: Why does the Bible reveal the sins and weaknesses of its characters for all to see? Why would a book, devoted to teaching truth and holiness, include so much detail about the moral failures and shortcomings of people who lived centuries ago? Why doesn't it focus solely on what is pure, holy, and admirable?

Another significant question that has long engaged Bible students concerns how people before the Cross were saved. Some scholars and preachers contend that salvation in Old Testament times was achieved through works of the law, whereas since the Cross, it has been by faith in Christ. In the Old Testament, animal sacrifices and obedience to specific laws were required, leading some to conclude that the Bible presents a double standard. Was salvation before the Cross based on one method and salvation after the Cross based on another? Did God truly establish two fundamentally different paths to salvation?

These two interesting questions will be answered in this lesson:

1. Why does the Bible record people's sins?
2. How were people saved from sin before the time of Jesus?

In future lessons, as we study the record contained in the Hebrew Scriptures, we will discover more detailed answers to the same two questions.

Objectives:

- I. We will note what the New Testament says about the reason for the Old Testament records.
- II. We will study the earliest evidence we have, in the experience of Abel, revealing how God intended to save all mankind.
- III. We will note the significance of the lives of such great men as Seth and Enoch.
- IV. We will study the manner in which God saved Noah.
- V. We will compare our situations with that of these early Bible characters to discover what God expects of us.

I. WHY DOES THE BIBLE GIVE SUCH DETAILED RECORDS OF PEOPLE'S LIVES?

This is a thought-provoking question. Often, we assume that saintly individuals must have lived flawless lives, untouched by the mundane struggles and sins that challenge humanity today. Yet, if the Bible omitted the failures of great men and women of God, we might mistakenly believe they were so far above us that we could never hope to attain their level of holiness. Few things are as discouraging as facing a standard that seems utterly unattainable.

The beauty of God's Word is that it presents a standard that is the same for all and assures us that everyone is offered the grace (power) needed to meet it. The detailed records in Scripture serve to encourage us by showing that all humanity shares common weaknesses—and that through a relationship with the Lord, all can be transformed and made holy.

The Word:

1. What reason does the Bible give for the records of the past contained in its pages? Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11
2. What qualities will be bestowed upon you as you study the Bible records? 2 Timothy 3:15-17
3. As we study the lives of believers in past ages, what are we encouraged to do? Hebrews 12:1-2; compare chapter 11

Explanation: The Bible's account of God's guidance throughout history serves as a profound source of hope for us today. Sacred history primarily aims to inspire us to turn to Christ as the foundation of our salvation. By highlighting the failures of individuals, Scripture underscores the truth that, apart from God, humanity has no defense against the forces of evil. It is only through reliance on His mighty power that we can become "*wise unto salvation*" 2 Timothy 3:15. Furthermore, the victories of patriarchs and prophets stand as powerful examples, urging us to cast aside our sins and fix our eyes on Jesus, "*the author and finisher of our faith*" Hebrews 12:1–2.

Relevance: No force, whether earthly or demonic, can thwart Christ's purpose for your life. See Romans 8:28–39. When His will has been frustrated in the past, it has been the result of human choice—to serve self and Satan rather than to embrace His plan for redemption. By surrendering to God's love and guidance, we can find victory and fulfillment in His divine purpose.

II. THE PLAN OF SALVATION REVEALED TO THE FIRST PATRIARCHS

The Lord did not abandon humanity to remain helpless in sin. From the moment sin entered the world, God revealed His plan of salvation—a plan that had been in His mind long before creation. In His divine foresight, God anticipated the need for redemption and prepared for it, demonstrating His boundless love and grace.

The Word:

4. What plan for man's salvation was worked out by God before our world was created? 1 Corinthians 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:2; Ephesians 1:4
5. When was this plan first revealed to mankind? Genesis 3:15
6. How did Abel show faith in God's plan? Why did Cain kill his brother? Genesis 4:1-11
7. Why was the offering of animal sacrifices evidence of faith? Hebrews 11:4; 8:4-6; 9:12-14; 10:3-53; John 1:29

Explanation: God foresaw that humanity would choose to sin after being created, yet His foreknowledge did not equate to predestination or predetermination. According to James 1:13, God is in no way responsible for sin. He desired the willing service of beings motivated by love, and so He gifted mankind with freedom of choice. This freedom inherently carried a risk, as it allowed for the possibility that humans might disobey His divine will. Anticipating this very challenge, God planned from eternity that Christ would come to earth and offer His life as a sacrifice to redeem humanity when the need arose.

In Old Testament times, animal sacrifices were instituted as a constant reminder of the Messiah who would one day come and die for the sins of the world. Abel's offering of a lamb demonstrated his faith in this promised Savior, while Cain's choice to present fruit and vegetables reflected a lack of such faith. Cain's gift, though well-intentioned, had not been requested by God and held no symbolic connection to the sacrificial death of the Messiah. The 'fruit of the ground' failed to represent the redemption that had been foretold.

The Cain-Abel Story: A Timeless Conflict of Faith vs. Works: The story of Cain and Abel highlights the enduring struggle between righteousness by works and righteousness by faith. Cain chose to pursue his own path rather than following

God's instructions. Human-devised efforts are never acceptable to God, as they fall short of His divine standard. Abel, on the other hand, did not earn righteousness through his animal sacrifice. Instead, his offering was an expression of faith—evidence that his relationship with God had resulted in the divine gift of righteousness. His act bore testimony that he was righteous, as affirmed in Hebrews 11:4.

Cain's attitude serves as an illustration of the futility of works-based righteousness, which offers no spiritual value. Abel's experience, however, demonstrates the transformative power of the everlasting covenant of righteousness by faith. God rejects self-reliant works but lovingly enters into covenant relationships with those who place their trust in Him.

Relevance: Do you, like Abel, choose to follow Christ's will because you believe in Him and allow Him to live in your heart? If so, your deeds are works of faith, reflecting genuine trust in God, and you are not a legalist. Conversely, if, like Cain, you attempt to earn God's favor through your own efforts and approach, your works are legalistic and ultimately unsatisfactory to the Lord. True obedience flows from faith, not self-reliance.

III. FAITHFUL SERVANTS OF GOD IN EARLY CENTURIES

Following Cain's murder of Abel, it became inevitable that humanity would divide into two distinct groups: those who, like Cain, rejected God's will, and those who, like Abel, embraced faith in God and entered into a spiritual relationship with Him.

The Word:

8. What kind of people were Cain's descendants? Genesis 4:16-24
9. What son of Adam began the line of men who trusted in the Lord? Genesis 4:25-26
10. What was special about Enoch who was born in the seventh generation from Adam? Genesis 5:18-24
11. According to the New Testament, what happened to Enoch? Why? Hebrews 11:5
12. What prophecy did Enoch make concerning the second coming of Christ? Jude 14-15

Explanation: Cain's descendants exhibited traits that stood in stark contrast to those who walked in God's ways. Cain, the world's first murderer, established the first city (Genesis 4:17)—a striking detail, as cities have often been associated with vice and corruption throughout history. Although many of Cain's descendants bore names similar to Seth's offspring, they formed a completely distinct lineage from Adam. Among them was Lamech, who became the first recorded polygamist (Genesis 4:19) and, like Cain, committed murder (verse 23).

In contrast, Seth represented a lineage of faith, beginning with those who *"called upon the name of the Lord"* Genesis 4:26. Seth faithfully carried on Abel's legacy, reflecting a life of devotion to God. From Seth's line emerged the patriarchs, all of whom remained true to God, with Enoch standing out as the most remarkable. Enoch, the son of Jared, lived for 365 years before God "took him" (Genesis 5:23–24). This act was not a taking of life but a divine translation into heaven, sparing Enoch from experiencing death (Hebrews 11:5). This extraordinary event occurred because Enoch had drawn so near to God through study, meditation and prayer that he was prepared for heaven—not because his works earned his place there. As Hebrews 11:5 affirms, Enoch was translated *"by faith."* His faith in the Messiah to come, who would die for sin, brought him the gift of God's righteousness, and his actions reflected that divine gift.

Additionally, Enoch was the first prophet to foretell the second coming of Jesus (Jude 14–15). His prophecy aligns with New Testament teachings on Christ's return (Matthew 24:30–31; 5:31), reinforcing his remarkable role in sacred history.

Relevance: The Bible teaches that just as Enoch pleased God, so can we. Immediately after referencing Enoch, the book of Hebrews states: *"Without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who seek him"* Hebrews 11:6. This reminds us that, just as Enoch pleased God through

faith, we too can bring Him joy by exercising the same trust. Why does such faith please God? John provides the answer: *"And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith"* 1 John 5:4.

What does it mean to "conquer the world"? The preceding verse clarifies: *"For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome"* 1 John 5:3. Enoch's faith empowered him to obey God's commandments, demonstrating his deep relationship with the Lord. As a result, Enoch was a righteous man whom God could take to live with Him forever.

Likewise, we are called to exercise the same faith, and by God's grace, we too can keep His commandments. In doing so, we prepare for heaven, as Jesus said: *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments"* John 14:15. True obedience flows from a heart of love and faith, just as it did for Enoch.

IV. HOW DID GOD SAVE NOAH?

The story of the flood will be covered in the next lesson. For now, our focus is on understanding how these ancient patriarchs experienced salvation from sin.

The Word:

13. What sort of man was Noah? Genesis 6:8-9, 22; 7:1
14. What kind of righteousness did Noah have, resulting in his salvation? Hebrews 11:7
15. What was the subject of Noah's preaching? 2 Peter 2:5
16. To what extent can the lives of saints like Noah point us to the ultimate source of righteousness—faith in Christ? Ezekiel 14:13-14, 20.

Explanation: Noah enjoyed righteousness by faith. His obedience to God's commands was the result of His heart relationship with Him. He was not saved because he obeyed. He obeyed because he enjoyed present salvation by faith. Such a faith-grace relationship with God is an individual experience.

You and I can also experience this profound union with God. However, the righteousness of Noah, or any other saint, cannot be transferred to us. The only true source of righteousness is the Lord Himself. He imparts this gift of righteousness to us through the Holy Spirit when we place our faith in Him (Romans 8:9-10). It is this divine power that enables us to emulate the faith and character of great figures like Abel, Seth, Enoch, and Noah.

Relevance: From the very beginning of human history, salvation has always come through faith in Christ. Do you share the faith of the early patriarchs? Are you depending on His gift of righteousness to free you from sin and transform your life?

V. OUR SITUATION COMPARED WITH THAT OF THE EARLY PATRIARCHS

Just as in the time of the early patriarchs, our world is divided between those who choose to serve the Lord and those who do not. These two groups remain fundamentally incompatible, as their philosophies and ways of life are inherently different. Living in such a divided world, is it truly possible for us to emulate the faithfulness of Abel, Seth, Enoch, Noah, and other great servants of God from those early centuries? How can we remain steadfast in our commitment to God amidst the challenges of a world where opposing values often collide?

The Word:

17. According to the Bible, how does our world compare with that of the early patriarchs? 2 Timothy 3:1-7; Jude 4, 8, 12-14; 2 Peter 3:3-4

18. How can we become righteous as were the great men of God in ancient times? Romans 5:1; 10:6-10

19. Because the gift of His grace is the power to keep His Law, on what basis will God judge us? Matthew 16:27; Revelation 22:12; 20:12; 1 Peter 1:17; 2 Corinthians 5:10

Explanation: Accepting Christ is the beginning of a lifelong process of spiritual growth and transformation. While salvation is immediate upon faith in Christ, living an obedient life is part of an ongoing journey—what Scripture refers to as sanctification. This process involves daily reliance on the Holy Spirit, surrendering to God's will, and growing in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18).

The division in our world today mirrors the separation seen in the early centuries. Yet, the means of salvation remain the same. The Lord, through His Holy Spirit, graciously draws us to Himself. When we respond with faith and accept Christ as our Savior and Lord, we enter into a covenant relationship with God, receiving the gift of His righteousness. This does not mean we immediately lead perfectly obedient lives. Instead, through a process of sanctification, God works in us, molding our thoughts and lifestyle into alignment with His will. Just as the ancient patriarchs rejected sin and grew in their faith and obedience to God, so can we—with His ongoing guidance and power.

By faith, we are empowered to emulate the faithfulness of great figures like Enoch and Noah. God judges us by our works—not as a means of salvation, but as evidence of the transformation taking place within us. Our salvation is by faith alone, but faith produces God's grace, enabling us to grow in obedience to His law (1 John 5:1-5). Abel's offering was an act of faith, not a guarantee of righteousness, but a testimony to the transformative relationship he had with God (Hebrews 11:4).

Relevance: The Lord is inviting you into a relationship with Him (Revelation 3:20). Accepting Him into your heart begins a transformative journey—not one of instant perfection, but of daily growth in grace and faith. This relationship, nurtured by His Spirit, gradually aligns your life with His will (James 2:14-17). Through faith, Christ, the source of all righteousness, takes up residence in your heart (Galatians 2:20), empowering and guiding you to walk in obedience and grow in holiness.

The righteousness of faithful men like Abel, Seth, Enoch, and Noah was not the result of their own strength but of their faith in God. Their actions—works of faith—were evidence of the transformative relationship they had with Him. You, too, can embark on this journey of faith, experiencing the same divine power to live a life that reflects God's love and righteousness.

Are you ready to trust the Savior as Abel did? Will you open your heart to let God shape your life as He did with Enoch?

Review Questions

1. True or False
 - a. The Old Testament stories were written for us.
 - b. We must offer animal sacrifices as Abel did.
 - c. We could never be as righteous as Enoch.
 - d. Salvation has always been by faith.
2. Discuss: In what ways can the examples of faith and righteousness from the lives of Abel, Seth, Enoch, and Noah inspire us in our own journey of spiritual growth today? How do we balance the struggle between faith and works in our relationship with God?

Further reflection: While faith itself is a gift from God, living out that faith in a world filled with distractions, temptations, and challenges often requires effort and perseverance. Even the apostle Paul described this experience as a "fight of faith" (1 Timothy 6:12) and likened it to running a race that demands discipline and focus (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

The struggle isn't about earning salvation—that comes by grace through faith—but about aligning our daily lives with the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. It's the process of growth, often called sanctification, where we learn to rely on God's strength rather than our own, while facing the internal and external challenges of living a godly life.

So while the struggle is real, it's also purposeful. It draws us closer to God, deepens our faith, and shapes our character.