

## Lesson 6

- The bible asks for obedience
- God's covenant with Abram
- The Son of God became man

## The bible asks for obedience

### Lesson 6a

#### The bible asks for obedience

The bible is no ordinary book. It is the book in which God speaks to us. We can therefore not just do anything we want with the bible. We have to be obedient to what God asks from us in his Word.

#### The bible asks for obedience

God is the Maker and Saviour of our life. He knows best what is good for us. God gave us his law so that we might know how to live. All the rules in this law have the same purpose: they teach us to love God and our fellow humans.

Romans 13:8-10

*'Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law. The commandments "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law'*

God wants us to keep the rules that are set out in his law. We have to take the law seriously because only a life in accordance to it can lead to happiness.

Authority and obedience are two things that we do not naturally like. There is a lot of talk about tolerance: every human being has the freedom to decide for himself how to live his life. Many people have this same attitude as it comes to the bible. Everyone is free to interpret the bible the way he wants. To God this so-called tolerance is intolerable. He wants us to live unconditionally according to his Word. We should not live our lives the way we want to but the way God wants us to live. The bible has to be the absolute norm for our lives.

In the bible God is very clear about how He wants to be served. Our only possible answer to this is:

Exodus 19:8

'We will do everything the Lord has said'

There is no future for people who claim to know God but do not want to live according to his will:

Matthew 7:21

*'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven'*

In the bible we find a lot of examples of disobedient behaviour. When we read the books of first and second Kings, we repeatedly come across this sentence:

1 Kings 15:26

*'He did evil in the eyes of the LORD'*

The kings of Israel are under God's authority. However, not all of them do what God asks of them. They do what they want and even start to worship the idols of other nations.

The life of king Saul, which is described in the books of Samuel, is full of examples of disobedience. Saul ignores the commands God gives him. He tries to make up for it with seemingly devout words and sacrifices, but God takes the crown away from him because He is not pleased with good intentions and a behaviour that goes against his will.

1 Samuel 15:22

*'Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices As much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed is better than the fat of rams'*

God also asks from us to be obedient to his Word.

#### Only the bible is to be obeyed

When God asks us for obedience, we are easily tempted into adding our own rules to those God has given to us. It seems very religious to do more than the bible asks from us and it is a

way to impress people around us. However, most of the time this is not what God wants. Again we can find examples in the bible of people who do this.

In the time of Jesus' life on earth there was a group of people, the Pharisees, who wanted to live very strictly according to God's laws. To be as strict as possible, they invented a whole lot of additional regulations. The result was often that their own regulations became more important than God's law. For example, the Pharisees kept the command of giving money for the temple\*. The bible also says that children should support their elderly parents. However, the Pharisees preferred to give their money away in the temple because that way everyone would be able to see their devotional act. They made the rule that it was not necessary to give money to your parents if you already gave your money to the temple. This man-made regulation opposed God's command: *Honour your father and your mother.*

Jesus condemns the Pharisees for making their own regulations more important than God's law:

Matthew 15:6 *'Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition'.*

There are more examples in the bible of people who want to add their own regulations to the bible. They make rules about eating and drinking or they prohibit marriage.

The bible calls this self-imposed worship. The apostle Paul points out that rules invented by man are worthless and only serve to satisfy our own desires:

Colossians 2:23 *'Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence'*

When someone tells us how to obey God, there is only one way for us to make sure he is telling the truth. We have to find

out what the bible says about it. We should not follow self-imposed laws but rather keep the law that God gives to us.

### **The whole of the bible is to be obeyed**

God only asks us to obey the bible. We are not supposed to add anything to it but neither should we take anything from it. It is important to mention this because there are people who want to be obedient but not to the whole of the bible. They decide for themselves what parts they want to listen to. Some people will for example say that only prayer is important while another person thinks that just being charitable is enough. The prophet Isaiah tells us about people who are very faithful in their visits to the temple to worship God. However, God says:

Isaiah 1:12-14

*'When you come to appear before me,  
Who has asked this of you,  
This trampling of my courts?  
Stop bringing meaningless offerings!  
Your incense is detestable to me.  
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations-  
I cannot bear your evil assemblies.  
Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates'*

The people who are addressed in this passage do obey God's command of temple worship, but they ignore God's commands about injustice.

When God asks for obedience, He wants us to obey the whole bible. Jesus told his disciples to go out to the nations:

Matthew 28:19

*'... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you'*

We need to obey all Jesus' commands, nothing more, nothing less.

### The way that leads to life

We have to obey the whole bible and only the bible. We are not to decide for ourselves how to live our lives. This often seems very difficult.

Jesus compares obedience with choosing a narrow gate: we have to live according to God's will and should not leave the road that leads through that gate or choose a different one.

Many people choose the wide gate to enter through: they decide for themselves how to live. It is very tempting to choose the wide gate. It seems easier and more enjoyable to decide for ourselves how to live.

Jesus shows how the road that leads through the wide gate eventually leads to destruction, while the road through the narrow gate leads to eternal life. God's commands do not serve to obstruct our lives, but to make sure our lives reach the goal God has planned for us. God's law is the only roadmap that will help us to find and follow this narrow road.

We do not need to be worried whether a life according to God's law is too difficult for us. Jesus tells us:

Matthew 11:30

*'My yoke is easy and my burden is light'*

Whoever believes that Jesus is Lord of his life, will receive the power to increasingly understand and obey God's commands.

### Questions

1. Why is it so hard for people to obey God? (You might want to look up lesson 2b).
2. God's law is good for us and for our fellow men. How can we often recognise man-made rules?
3. How can we tell that Jesus understands our difficulty keeping the law?

## Lesson 6b

### God's covenant with Abram

Several times God has already promised Abram that He would give him the land of Canaan and that his descendants would become a great nation. However, years go by and nothing happens. Sarai does not get pregnant and Abram still does not possess any land.

### A great offspring

Read: Genesis 15:1-6

15:1 *vision*: explained in the list of vocabulary

One night, Abram has a vision, a type of dream, in which God speaks to him. God encourages Abram by telling him that He will be his shield. The way a shield protects someone in battle, God will protect Abram in Canaan. God also promises to reward Abram for his faith and trust.

From what follows it is evident that Abram's confidence in God is no longer as strong as it used to be. He has become discouraged because he is getting very old and still does not have a child. He assumes that his servant Eliezer will become his heir.

However, God again promises that Abram will have a son.

Abram will bring forth a great nation. Abram's offspring will be as numerous as the stars. The God who made the stars is able to give Abram and Sarai a child.

Abram believes God's promise and God is pleased: '*he credited it to him as righteousness*'. That means: God regards Abram as righteous because of his faith. Abram is not a perfect man. Just like everyone else he deserves God's punishment. However, because he trusts in God, God regards him as a friend.

### A covenant

A covenant is an agreement between two parties. Two parties promise each other something. They make an obligation. An

example of a covenant is a marriage: a man and a woman who love each other enter into a covenant. They promise faithfulness and they promise to take care of each other. If one of the marriage partners commits adultery, he or she breaks the promise. Unfaithfulness breaks the covenant of marriage.

The bible often speaks of a covenant between God and one or more people or between God and his people Israel. There are certain parallels between God's covenant and a marriage:

- It is about love. God loves the people He enters into a covenant with.
- There are mutual agreements: God promises faithfulness to the people He enters into a covenant with and He expects faithfulness in return from them.

There is also a major difference between a marriage and God's covenant. In a marriage both partners are equal and together they agree to get married. However, God and the people of his covenant are not equal partners. Only God can decide who He wants to enter into a covenant with.

Essentially, God already started the covenant in paradise when He made an agreement with Adam. If the people would keep one simple promise, God was under the obligation to give them eternal life. However, Adam and Eve broke the covenant. In terms of marriage: they were unfaithful. It is amazing that God does not leave his partners in the covenant when they are unfaithful to Him. Again and again, He comes to them to renew the covenant. When people break it, He wants to restore it and He adds new promises and agreements.

Read: Genesis 15:7-21

15:17 *a smoking brazier with a blazing torch*: Abram does not get to see God. He sees smoke and fire, which is how God chooses to appear to him.

The way in which God makes a covenant with Abram might seem very strange to us. However, in that time it was the usual way to make a covenant. When two kings entered into a covenant together, they would kill a number of animals, cut them in half and put the halves down opposite each other one after the other. Then they would both walk through the path in the middle that was covered in blood. In that way they were saying: we belong together like the two halves of the animals belong together; if I do not keep the covenant, may what has happened to the animals, happen to me.

The difference between a normal covenant and the one between God and Abram is that here only God walks the path between the animals. Only because of God, there can be a covenant between them. God and Abram were no equal partners.

God does not only promise Abram the land of Canaan, He moreover tells him something of the history of the promised nation. They will have to live in a foreign country for four hundred years. Only after that, God will punish the Amorites, who now live in Canaan and take their land away from them. God wants to wait with the punishment until their wickedness has reached its limits.

### **Abram organises a son**

Abram believes in God's promise, but it is not long before his confidence disappears again. When Sarai still does not get pregnant, she suggests to Abram that perhaps he should have intercourse with her maidservant. She thinks that perhaps God means that she can give Abram a son, rather than Sarai. Abram takes her advice and has a son, Ishmael, with Hagar, Sarai's maidservant.

In that time it was not unusual for a man to have more than one wife. Besides, Abram and Sarai's solution to childlessness is not unusual. Being childless was an enormous disgrace. Many men would use their wife's maidservant as their second

wife and count the child that would be born as belonging to their first wife. Nevertheless, God did not want men to have more than one wife and what Abram and Hagar do is against God's will. God wants to give a son to Abram and Sarai but not in this way.

### **The sign of the covenant**

In Genesis 15 we read that God made a covenant with Abram. The covenant was not just for Abram. All his descendants will be part of it. A few years later God tells Abram about this.

Read: Genesis 17:1-14

17:1 *God Almighty*: This name shows how God has the power to fulfil all his promises.

17:1 *walk before me*: focus your life on me

17:10 *to circumcise*: to remove the foreskin from a boy or a man's penis

When Abram is almost a hundred years old, God again appears to him. Again God promises him descendants. Abram will bring forth many nations. Besides, God tells him that the covenant they made will last forever. God wants to be in a covenant relationship with Abram's descendants. God promises:

Genesis 17:7

*'I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you'*

Abram's male descendants will carry a sign to show they belong to God: they will be circumcised. From the scar that will remain they will be able to tell for the rest of their lives that they belong to the covenant.

Mankind itself is wicked. The fact that Abram's descendants would be scarred shows that a person cannot belong to God unless his wickedness has been cut away from him. Only

## God's covenant with Abram

when that has happened they can belong to God. Circumcision symbolises the removal of sin.

### Who is it for?

One beautiful aspect of the covenant between God and man is that it also includes children. A person does not need to be an adult to be part of it. God places children on his side when they are still too young to believe. God chooses them before they can choose Him. That is why God wants the boys to be circumcised when they are only eight days old. (At that age circumcision causes hardly any pain).

Only men have to be circumcised. This does not mean that women do not belong to the covenant. God's promises are also for them, as is the need for their wickedness to be taken away. Nevertheless, only men carry the sign of the covenant.

The covenant between God and man still exists. Nowadays everyone who belongs to it is baptised – submerged in or sprinkled with water. Both men and women are baptised and the children of believers. Soon after their birth they receive a sign to show that they belong to God. We will discuss more about baptism in lesson 15c.

### A new name

Read: Genesis 17:15-22

17:22 *God went up from him: to heaven*

Again God promises Abram that he will have a son. As a guarantee He gives both Abram and Sarai a new name. When God gives someone a new name in the bible, it often means that it is turning point in that person's life. A new time will start for the person who receives the new name. God gives him a new position.

The same is true for Abram and Sarai. Abram will in the future be called Abraham. God tells him what is going to change in his life: he will be the father of many nations. Sarai will in the future be called Sarah as a sign of a new time in her life. She

will give birth to a son and become the mother of many nations.

Abram kneels down in reverence for God. Nevertheless, deep inside he is laughing at the idea of him and Sarah having a son at their age. He says to God: May your promise be true for Ishmael.

However, God has a different plan. He wants to bless Ishmael and make him into a great nation. However, Ishmael is not the son that God had promised. He is the son that Abram organised in a way contrary to God's will.

God makes his promise to Abraham very concrete. He says that the promised son will come in a year's time.

### Sodom and Gomorrah

Not long after God again appears to Abraham. One day, as Abraham sits in front of his tent, three men pass by. According to the eastern custom of hospitality, Abraham invites them in for a meal and the men accept the invitation.

The visitors are no ordinary people: God and two angels appear in human bodies. One of the men tells Abraham that his wife will give birth to a son within a year. Sarah, who is inside the tent, hears him and laughs. Then Abraham's guest, God, asks him: *'Why did Sarah laugh? ... Is anything too hard for the LORD?'*

After dinner Abraham walks along with his visitors. While two of them are going their separate way to the city of Sodom, God stays behind to talk to Abraham. God tells Abraham that He has heard that the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah are living thoroughly wicked lives. It has become so bad that God has decided to destroy the cities.

Abraham is shocked. He asks God to change his mind. He suggests that there might be innocent people in the cities.

Would God, the judge of the earth, be unjust? Would he kill innocent people along with wicked people? Abraham pleads for Sodom and Gomorrah. God listens and promises him that

He will not destroy the cities if He can find ten righteous people.

The next day, when Abraham returns to the hill where he spoke with God, he sees what has happened. Enormous clouds of smoke rise up from the direction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Apparently, God has had to destroy the cities because there were not even ten righteous people.

Nevertheless, a few people have been saved. Abraham's nephew Lot has been able to escape with his wife and his daughters. Lot had left Abraham, but because of Abram's pleas, God has saved him.

### Questions

1. It was difficult for Abraham to keep faith in God's promises.
  - a. How do you know from Abraham's words and actions that this is true?
  - b. In what ways did God make sure that Abraham's faith would not disappear?
2.
  - a. Give a summary of Genesis 18:16-33. 18:16 *the men*: God and the two angels
  - b. What do you learn about God from this passage?
3. The New Testament often refers to Abraham. Paul uses the life of Abraham to explain the main issues of the Christian faith.
  - a. What does a wicked person need to become righteous before God? Look at Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6
  - b. God promises Abraham a numerous offspring. Which people count as Abraham's offspring to God? How is that possible? Look at Galatians 3:6-9 and Galatians 3:29. 3:8 *Scripture*: the bible, in this case the Old Testament, 3:8 *Gentiles*: people who do not belong to the people of Israel and therefore do not descend from Abraham, 3:29 *seed*: offspring, 3:29 *heirs*: of God's salvation and all his other promises.



## Lesson 6c

### The Son of God became man

In the last lesson we made a start with the second part of the Apostolic Creed about the Son of God. In this lesson we will look at the second and third article about the Son: 'And (I believe) in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary'.

### God's only Son

The first thing that we are told about Jesus Christ is that He is God's only Son. The Saviour whom God gives to the world is not just anyone. It is his very own child. God has been willing to give us the greatest possible thing: He gave up his only Son to save us.

You might wonder whether Jesus actually was God's only Son. Aren't all people sons and daughters of God? Indeed, we can be sons and daughters of God, but in a very different way from Jesus Christ. Only due to what Jesus has done we can be adopted as God's children. Jesus is God's natural Son. He has always been his Son from before the beginning of time.

### Our Lord

The next thing about Jesus Christ in the creed is that He is our Lord. He is our lord and master. The word 'lord' stems from the time that the New Testament was written. In that time many people would have someone who was lord over them. Many people were slaves and in the service of a lord. Christians could be seen as slaves in the service of Jesus Christ. That does not sound like good news. Who would want to lose his freedom? No one would ever apply for a job as a slave.

To be able to understand why it is good news that we can call Jesus our Lord, we will have to go back to the moment of the fall. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command, they thought they would gain from their decision. However, the

exact opposite happened. They lost their freedom. By obeying Satan, they had become subject to his power. That was God's punishment for what they had done. From then on, they and all their descendants would have to serve Satan. They would not be able to do anything but sin. And not only that: because of their unfaithfulness they became guilty before God and deserved the death penalty. It was a dreadful prospect.

However, Jesus took away the guilt of the people and was punished instead of them. He underwent the death penalty that they deserved. In that way he paid the debt that people had with God and He liberated the people from the power of Satan. Since Jesus' death, we no longer belong automatically to Satan. Whoever believes in Jesus does not have to regard Satan as lord. Jesus has become his Lord. Jesus is not a cruel slave driver. It is great to be in his service. You could say that being a slave of Jesus is the only true freedom.

### The Son of God became man

The next thing the creed says about Jesus is that He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. In a few words it relates the miraculous way in which the Son of God became man. He was not put on the earth as an adult. Just like every other human being He was born as a baby. He was born from Mary, an ordinary woman. The special part is that He was not conceived by a man. Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Him.

The bible tells us how Mary, an Israelite girl, one day receives a visit from a messenger of God, the angel Gabriel. Mary is terrified, but the angel comforts her and tells her not to be afraid: God is with her.

The angels brings Mary a message from God. She will become pregnant and have a son. She will have to call the son Jesus. The angel also tells her that her son will have a special role: he will be the king over Israel. Not just for a period of time, but forever. Mary does not understand how she can possibly become pregnant. She is not married. She is pledged

to be married to Joseph, but she has never had intercourse with him. The angel tells her:

Luke 1:35

*'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God'*

Joseph is not to be the father of the child that Mary will give birth to. The Holy Spirit, the power of God (who is called the Most High in this passage), will cause Mary to be pregnant. What the angel says happens. Mary falls pregnant without the help of a man. And she becomes the mother of Jesus, the Saviour of the world.

### **A story of the imagination?**

Many people do not believe that Jesus really was born of a virgin. They think Jesus is the son of Joseph, Mary's fiancée and that the writers of the bible made the story up after Jesus had died. They argue that we do not need to believe it really happened like this but rather focus on the intention of the writers, which according to them is to show that Jesus was a man of God.

Why can't we believe that Jesus was born of a virgin? The way Jesus was conceived is a miracle. We cannot understand it. However, that does not need to be a reason to say that it cannot have happened. The bible tells us plenty of things that cannot be explained by science. God made Adam from dust and from Adam's rib He made Eve. Abraham's wife Sarah became pregnant when she was ninety, which is impossible if you ask any doctor. Why would the God who made heaven and earth not be able to make his Son become man in this way?

### **Jesus: a real man**

Whoever believes in Jesus has a Lord who stands right beside him. Jesus is not so high that He is out of touch with our daily lives. He is a man just like us.

He was born as a little baby. Everything a baby has to learn, He had to learn: to sit, to speak, to walk. When He grew up, He had to learn how to read and write. His stepfather Joseph, a carpenter, taught him how to use a hammer and saw. Jesus knew both joy and sadness, just like everyone of us. He could be so tired that He fell asleep on the deck of a fishing boat and slept through a violent storm. He would be hot and cold. He was hungry when He had not had anything to eat for a while. He would get upset. He cried tears of sadness when one of his friends died. He was sweating with fear just before He had to undergo God's punishment. He died. He was a real man.

Again and again the bible ensures us that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became a man like us. The implication of this is that Jesus understands us. He knows our problems. He knew them for himself. He knows how hard life can be. He has suffered immensely. Because He is a man like us He can understand us and help us when we struggle.

### **Jesus: a perfect man**

The Son of God became like us in every way. However, in one aspect He radically differed from us. He was without sin. He was a perfect man and never did anything wrong. He perfectly obeyed God, his Father. He never said or thought anything that was bad. Satan tried to pull Him away from God, like he tried with Adam and Eve. But Jesus remained faithful to God. The fact that Jesus never committed any sin is more than just a peculiarity. It is of great importance. Only because Jesus was faithful to God all his life, He could be our Saviour.

### **Jesus: more than a man**

Jesus was an ordinary human being. He did not look any different from other men. Nevertheless, He was more than a man as his life shows us. From his words and his deeds it is clear that He is God.

## The Son of God became man

### His words

How did Jesus' words show that He was more than a man? We will give a few examples. Jesus called himself 'the Son' and when He would talk about his father it was clear that He did not mean Joseph, but God.

Jesus said things about himself that an ordinary man would not be able to say. When He once had a discussion about Abraham, He said:

John 8:58

*'I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am'*

In other words, before Abraham was born, Jesus already existed. How could a thirty-year-old man say something like that? Abraham lived about two thousand years before Jesus was born. This remark shows that Jesus was more than an ordinary human being.

Jesus gave himself names that no one could give himself. He said:

John 8:12

*'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life'*

When an ordinary man would say something like that people would think he suffered of a superiority complex. Who on earth can call himself the light of the world? A Jew would not dream of saying that because the light of the world was God. In the Old Testament it said of God:

Psalms 27:1

*'The LORD is my light'*

Jesus was able to say this about himself because He was God. What He said is true. He is the light of the world. Whoever believes in Him no longer lives in darkness, but in the light. In the bible the light means the kingdom\* of heaven. Darkness is related to Satan, with a life without God.

Another example. Jesus once said of himself:

John 10:11

*'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep'*

Again a Jew would never dream of saying this about himself. It would be regarded as an insult to God. In the Old Testament God is called a shepherd. People are compared to his sheep.

Psalms 23:1-4

*'The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters, ... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me; Your rod and your staff they comfort me.'*

### His deeds

His deeds also showed that Jesus was more than an ordinary human being. He forgave people their sins. Only God was able to do that.

If an ordinary man would do that, God would punish him. A human being cannot behave as if he was God's equal. However, God did not punish Jesus. On the contrary, He underlined Jesus' words. God gave Him the power to do great miracles. Jesus could heal ill people with a single word. He could change a violent storm into a soft breeze. He could raise dead people back to life. (We will discuss these miracles further in lesson 18b).

That Jesus was what He claimed to be was absolutely clear from everything He did during his life on earth. In Jesus, God himself came down to save people from destruction.

### Jesus remained God

We need to return briefly to the beginning of Jesus' life. In earlier lessons we saw that God is eternal. He has always been and will always be. This not only goes for God the Father but also for his Son and for the Holy Spirit. The Son of God did

not first come into existence when Mary gave birth to Him, He was there from eternity.

So what happened when He became man? Did the Son of God change into a man? No, He did not change, He remained God, but He became man as well as God. He took on human nature, the human form of being. He became God and man in one person.

The fact that Jesus besides man was also fully God does not mean that He stood over everything else and nothing could do Him any harm. We said earlier that He was a man like each of us. He knew sadness, pain, hunger and thirst. He suffered and died.

Only because He was man could He pay our debts. Because He was man, He could die – in our place.

Because He was fully God at the same time, He had the power to carry the heavy punishment that was to be paid for sin and it enabled Him to gain a victory over death.

### Questions

1. 'Jesus is our Lord'. This one sentence is a summary of the gospel. Explain.
- 2a How do we know Jesus was an ordinary human being like all of us?
- 2b How do we know He was different from us at the same time? Why was it necessary for the Saviour of mankind to be a man?
- 3b. Why did the Saviour have to be God at the same time?