

“Credited to Him as Righteousness,” Genesis 15:1-21 (Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost, October 7, 2018)

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”

² But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.” ⁵ He took him outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” ⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

⁷ He also said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.” ⁸ But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?”

⁹ So the LORD said to him, “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.” ¹⁰ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. ¹¹ Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

¹² As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. ¹³ Then the LORD said to him, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

¹⁷ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, ²⁰ Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, ²¹ Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”

PRAY

We are studying the life of Abraham on Sunday mornings at Grace. He’s referred to as Abram in Genesis 15, but for the sake of consistency we’ll call him Abraham. And what he is known for most of all is that he is a man of faith. We’ve already considered Abraham’s faith once in this sermon series, but we’ll look at it again today from a different angle.

What can we learn from Abraham about faith? Two things: *first, the nature of faith in God. Second, the guarantee of faith in God.*

Prior to chapter fifteen of Genesis, God has spoken to Abraham **twice**: once in chapter twelve, and once in chapter thirteen. Both times God makes promises to Abraham: that he will give Abraham many descendants, make Abraham into a great nation, and also that this land – Canaan – will belong to him and his people forever.

At the beginning of chapter fifteen God says, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” Genesis 15:1. God is making the promise again to Abraham, a **third time** – I’ve chosen you, I’m going to bless you, and you will have a great reward.

In response, Abraham says, “O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?”³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.” Genesis 15:2-3. You can almost hear the desperation in his voice.

Now, remember, whatever else the Bible says about Abraham, it is absolutely clear that he’s a man of faith. So what does this teach us about the nature of faith? Three things: *faith is only faith when things look hopeless.*

Abraham’s situation looks hopeless. He’s supposed to have a child, but he’s old. He’s probably around 80 years old. He’s 75 in chapter twelve when God first spoke to him in Haran, he’s 86 in chapter sixteen at the birth of Ishmael, so 80 seems about right to me. He’s old, and his wife is old – she’s 70 years old. Given what they knew and what we know about the human reproductive system, it is impossible that he will ever have a child with his wife.

But Abraham is not only promised children. He’s promised land. He’s promised all the land he can see from the highest hills in Canaan. But right now, at age 80, the land is full of all the “ites” – the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Gergashites, and Jebusites. They live on the land, they far outnumber Abraham, and they don’t seem inclined at all to move and give it away.

Abraham’s situation doesn’t just look hopeless; it is hopeless. **But only when everything looks hopeless does faith truly become faith.**

Some of you have no problem admitting your situation is hopeless. You know your situation is desperate, and your faith in God is all you have.

But for now I want to talk to everyone else. As a rule it’s hard to talk about faith with a crowd like this, in a town like this, because for so many of us we don’t feel the need for much faith. Our church is full of bright, resourceful, intelligent, capable people. Our church is full of young people. And when you’re in your teens and twenties and even into your thirties, you just kind of assume everything’s going to work out for you.

We don't feel like we need faith. We don't have to pray and trust God; we can just go out and get what we want. We are rich in the eyes of the world, and so we are weak in faith. That's why Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." Mark 10:25. And that's why Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Luke 6:20b. When you're rich, you don't need faith – but the poor know they need God so they are stronger in faith.

But let me tell you a couple of areas where you are hopeless. There will probably be others but I can guarantee you two areas. First, you will need faith that God will change hearts. I don't care how resourceful you are, you can't change your kids, you can't change your spouse, you can't change your parents or your boss. And sooner or later, you will be desperate for that to happen. You'll need faith.

You'll need faith that God can change your heart, because you find you are powerless over some things in your own life. You'll find you're powerless over your selfishness and greed or lusts, or the need to keep up appearances. Maybe you'll find you're powerless over an addiction. When that time comes (and it will), you'll feel hopeless and you'll need faith.

The other area where you need faith in God is when it comes to death. Do you know what the human mortality rate is? It's one hundred percent.

It's hard to think a lot about death when you're my age or younger, I know. Few of us have been around much death or have ever been seriously ill. Of course, that changes when you get older. But I assure you: it doesn't matter how resourceful you are ***no one is getting out of this life alive.*** For whatever happens to us and whatever happens to those whom we love so dearly after we die, we need faith, trust, that God will take care of us.

God promises that he will change hearts of many people in your life (most especially your own) and he promises to deliver you through even death. He also promises a lot of other blessings beside. But until you feel hopeless about your ability to move the needle in any of those parts of your life you don't really have faith.

Second thing about the nature of faith: faith in God is not the same thing as having no doubts. There seems to be a popular misconception out there about faith in God that says, "Real faith in God is blind, it never asks questions, it never has sleepless nights of wondering what God is up to. Real faith never betrays a hint of doubt and ignores the circumstances of life."

But Abraham, the man of faith in the Bible, looked at his circumstances and had doubts! Abraham says, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" Genesis 15:2-3.

God responds in 4-5: "Then the word of the LORD came to him: 'This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.' ⁵ He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'" This is the **fourth time since Genesis 12** God makes the promise to Abraham.

We read that Abraham believes God in verse 6 – we’ll come back to that. But then we read: God said to Abraham, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”⁸ But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?” Genesis 15:7-8. That’s a **fifth promise** from God, followed by even more doubts by Abraham. Yet in the text we don’t read even a hint of God’s rebuke.

Friends, please know: real faith in God is big enough to handle your doubts that God will do what he has promised and it’s big enough to handle your questions. Some of you grew up in church environments where if you expressed doubts or asked questions they took your head off. They said, “Don’t doubt, don’t question, don’t explore your faith – just believe.” Friends, anyone who says that has never really read the Bible, especially the Psalms. Most of the Psalms involve the Psalmist saying something like this: “Where are you, Lord? You promised this, but I haven’t received it. How long, O Lord?”

It’s OK to have doubts and questions. I love Jude 22: “And have mercy on those who doubt ...”

God never got mad at Abraham for his doubts and questions. In fact, that’s how Abraham’s faith grew. It’s how your faith will grow, too. The best commentary on Abraham’s faith in the Bible was written by the apostle Paul in Romans 4, where he writes: “¹⁸In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.”¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb.²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith [it didn’t happen all at once] as he gave glory to God,²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.” Romans 4:18-21.

Third, faith in God requires endurance. I said earlier that Abraham was about 80 years old in Genesis 15, so he’d been trusting in God’s promises for five years at that point. We know, however, the promise about his son wasn’t fulfilled for another twenty. Twenty-five years Abraham waited in faith on God to fulfill his promise about a son. And about the land – Abraham won’t even see that promise fulfilled. It will happen, but four hundred years after the promise was made. That’s verse 13.

If you trust God, he will work in your life. No doubt about it. But he will rarely work the way you think he should and it will almost always take longer than you think you can stand.

We want God to work immediately. If it’s a sin issue in our life, we want God to remove it the way a doctor would a wart or a mole. We go in, get some localized pain killer, the doctor does his thing and, *viola*, an hour later it is gone. If we need a blessing, we want God to be like Amazon Prime – here in two days and with free shipping.

But that’s not how God works. Faith requires endurance. You have to be in it for the long haul while you wait for him to work. “Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” Romans 5:3-4.

That's the nature of faith, *and it's not easy*: it requires hopelessness, it means doubts and endurance. Faith is painful. Faith is hard won. So in the midst of exercising your faith in God, what will sustain you? This second point is for all of us, but especially for the people who didn't need point one to convince you of your hopelessness. You *know* you are hopeless. You've been barely hanging on for so long. What keeps us trusting in God instead of turning away?

Second, the guarantee of our faith. God has promised Canaan to Abraham but in Genesis 15:8 Abraham replies, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" What's going on here? Abraham wants a **guarantee** from God that he is not wasting his time by trusting him.

And what does God do? Something that at first glance to us looks really weird, but when you understand it becomes the most powerful guarantee for faith in God anyone could ask for.

"So the LORD said to him, 'Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.'" Genesis 15:9.

God was able to say, "Bring me these animals," and Abraham knew exactly what God was talking about. What's going on? **They are making a covenant.**

In our culture, our written culture, how do we make a covenant? We write it down and both parties sign it. If I say, "I have doubts about you. How do I know you're going to perform your end of the contract? I don't want to just trust your word." You say, "I'll put my signature on a piece of paper." That's your way of guaranteeing my faith in you.

That's not how covenants worked back then. In an oral culture, you acted out the covenant. Specifically, you acted out the curse that would befall you if you didn't keep your word.

One party would cut the animals in pieces and say, "If I do not do everything I promise this day, may I be as these animals. May I be cursed and cut to pieces. May my body be food for the animals of the earth and birds of the air."

I heard a pastor preach on this text who said that the next time you have some major work done on your house, when you meet with the contractor say, "I don't want us to sign a contract, and I don't need a construction bond. But I brought this heifer here today. Let's cut it up and you walk between it." I bet if you did that you would get some quality work out of the contractor.

Typically, when these kinds of covenants were made in antiquity, only the weaker party, the vassal, walked between the pieces. The stronger party, the king, never did, because he didn't have to. The vassal needed the great king's protection, so he walked between the pieces.

Therefore, Abraham thought that, of course, he was about to have to walk through the pieces. But when you think about it, you realize that wouldn't have been much help to him. Abraham is the one who had doubts about whether or not God would perform, he's the one that wants a guarantee of his faith.

But Abraham didn't walk. That's not what happened. What happened is one of the most dramatic scenes in the entire Bible. Genesis 15 takes place over a night, a day, and another night. During that full day Abraham cuts up the animals, lines them up, and waits. He waits for the “go” command from God.

But it doesn't come. The buzzards come, and Abraham has to shoo them away. But no command.

Then as the sun is about to set Abraham falls into a deep sleep and a **dreadful darkness**. He has a vision of some sort. God speaks and again (!) makes his promises clear to Abraham. And then we read this: “When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.” Genesis 15:17.

What is that about? All the commentators point out that the two Hebrew words translated as “smoking fire pot” and “flaming torch” also show up in the Old Testament when God descends on Mount Sinai. This is the fiery, cloudy pillar we see in the Bible whenever the glory presence of God shows up on earth. One commentator in particular points out that the word for “flaming torch” is a word often used for lightning. “What this means is as Abraham watched, a searing streak of lightning appeared and held its shape. You see, you and I only ever see lightning as a flash and then it's gone. [But this is] a searing streak of lightning that appeared and held its shape. Imagine the fire. Imagine the radiance. Imagine the smoke. Imaging the crackling, the sparks. It held its shape, and it passed between the pieces.” Tim Keller, “Abraham and the Fire.”

Abraham witnesses this and realizes this is not simply the **sixth time** God makes the same promise. This is different. God is *walking between the pieces*. God is saying, “If I do not do everything I promise this day, may I be as these animals. May I be cut to pieces. May I be cursed and die.”

This is unheard of. But as amazing as that is, that's not all that's going on. Abraham reasonably expected that after God walked through the pieces he would have to walk through. That's how covenants were made. But after God walks through we simply read verse 18: “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram ...” The ceremony is over. Abraham doesn't do a thing.

God says, “Not only will I bear the curse if I don't fulfill my end of the covenant and bless you, but I will bear the curse if you don't fulfill your end of the covenant and obey me. If I'm not faithful, I'll be cursed. And if you're not faithful, I'll be cursed.”

This is grace. This is God saying, “No matter what happens, Abraham, whether you keep your end of the covenant or not, whether you obey me or not, I am binding myself to you. I will bless you, provide for and protect you no matter what you do.”

Now, we kind of skipped over Genesis 15:6 earlier in the sermon. We'll cover it now. “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” Because of his faith in God, his trust in God, God declared Abraham righteous, or approved, in God's sight. Just because Abraham believed the promises of God, God declared him righteous.

But that does not mean Abraham was *sinless*. Atonement still had to be made for his sins – and by passing through the pieces of the animal, God foreshadowed how later on in history he would do it. Galatians 3:6-10, 13-14: “Abraham ‘believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’ [that’s a quote of Genesis 15:6] ... ⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. ¹⁰ For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” ... ¹³ [But] Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’— ¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”

God became a man in Jesus Christ, and he was *sinless*. He did not have to die for his own sins because he didn’t have any. But rather than take his reward, he took our curse. When he went to the cross, a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. The sun refused to shine. And on the cross, he fulfilled both ends of God’s covenant with Abraham. This is God saying, “Not only will I bear the curse if I don’t fulfill my promises to you, but I *have* borne the curse you deserve for you fulfilling your end of the covenant by obeying me.”

Abraham got the smoking firepot and the flaming torch as his guarantee of faith, but you know we get something better as a guarantee of our faith. We get the bread and the cup. It’s better because while Abraham had to wonder how in the world God could keep his promises and fulfill both ends of the covenant, we know how he did it – through the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Are you in a hopeless situation? Do you see no way out? Have you been enduring it seems for years and you don’t know if you can believe God any longer? Then look to Jesus Christ dying for you on the cross. **See how he has bound himself to you in the covenant!** He will be your shield and great reward. And to the degree you see that it will serve to guarantee and strengthen your faith. As the old hymn puts it: “What wondrous love is this, O my soul! What wondrous love is this, that caused the Lord of bliss, to bear the dreadful curse, for my soul, for my soul.”
PRAY