

The Righteous Believer

Genesis 15

There is often a very great difference between trusting in God and trusting God. Many people who claim to trust in God struggle with trusting God. Let me see if I can illustrate what I mean:

We can trust in God to save us from our sins. Yet, we often struggle with the hardships and sufferings God to actually deliver us and purify us from our sins. We trust in Him to save us, but don't trust that He really knows what He is doing.

We can trust in God to provide all our needs. We don't trust God to know what our needs are. So, we divert what we ought to be giving to support a lifestyle God is not providing for.

The reality is that true faith is both trusting in God and trusting God. You rest in Him and you accept what He brings, regardless. This is what this chapter is all about. Will Abram both trust in God for the offspring and will he trust God for the timing?

Now, the structure of this text is a different kind of parallelism. It follows the form of Hebrew parallelism. I have tried to represent the Hebrew structure in them as follows:

- A The Covenant Grounded in God
 - B The Concern arising from Faith
 - C The Confirmation through a Symbol
- a The Covenant Grounded in God
 - b The Concern arising from Faith
 - c The Confirmation through a Symbol

Here is one of those strange narratives in the Bible that seem so distant from us. What possible connection can all this strangeness have to do with our world, our concerns today? This is one of the challenges in studying and in preaching the Bible. Yet, even in this strangeness there is an important nearness for us. Here is the God who promises and the believer who is counted righteous through believing.

The Reward for the Faithful (v.1-5)

"After these things" reminds us that what follows is connected to what went before. Abram has shown his humility in what he gave and in what he refused. So now, he may be a greater man for it, but he is also a poorer man.

15 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ² But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." ⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." ⁵ And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be

A The Covenant Grounded in God (v.1)

The Lord comes to him in a vision to affirm the promise. Here God appears to Abram in a vision. This is again, the first time this word is used in this way. God discloses Himself to Abram through a vision. In Redemptive History, this chapter launches the long thread of visionary and prophetic motifs. In this first unit, the Divine initiative comes in a vision.

The promise is grounded in the identity of God. God says, "You may have given much; you may have refused great wealth; but I am your shield. Do not be afraid." Faith in the God of the promises deals with the issue of fear. God is our shield; do not fear for the reward is very great.

The Concern arising from Faith (v.2-3)

But notice Abram's concern. If he has no family to pass on to this reward, this promise, then what does it really matter? What does a reward mean to man with a great promise but no children? He continues to be childless. You already begin to hear some of the frustration. This is not doubt. This is faith trying figure out what is going on. It is because he does believe God that this is an issue. After all, if God's promises are not to be trusted, why even be concerned about the inheritance? The heir is going to a servant and a foreigner. While he may be a good and godly man, he is not a son.

What we see here is a humble faith. The way Abram addresses God with “O, Lord God” is using terms that express his humility, his dependence on God. God is his Lord, His King, His sovereign. He is a servant. But he is a servant with a promise and a problem.

The Confirmation through a Symbol (v.4-5)

O, the gracious goodness of God. He looks down at this servant with a promise and a problem tells him to look up. In the symbol, the sign, the star dotted fields of heaven, God encourages this faithful, humble, generous warrior to have hope.

Can Abram count the stars? No. He cannot count the ones he can see. Half the visible stars from earth are hidden on the other side of the globe. The magnificent splendor of squillions of stars now visible to us through the Hubble telescope is way beyond his ken. But the stars cannot be counted. Abram’s offspring also cannot be numbered. And even more than he could have imagined, for all those who believe are sons of Abraham, the believer.

The Righteousness by Faith (v.6)

What a great sentence we have here! He believes God and God assigns righteousness to him. This is at the center and is the key point. If we were writing this, this would be the punch line. This would be the point. It is here in the middle because all that transpires here is an expression of Abram’s faith in God and God confirming His promise and thus, the assurance of a right standing before God.

I want to take this sentence and explore it for a moment. This is one of those places where I must at least traverse some of the Bible so that we will get this right.

⁶ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

In its Old Covenant Context

First, this not when Abraham was saved. The point of the text is not to identify the moment of a salvation transaction. That is a question we bring to the text not a question the text is answering. The language here does not support a “at this moment Abram savingly believes.” The “and” in the Hebrew is not “and then”. Abram engages God with questions, not in order to believe in God, but because he does believe in God. His trust in God has brought him into right standing before God. God credits him, puts on his account, righteousness through faith, through believing. Faith itself is not the righteousness. Nor is exercise of faith an act meriting righteousness. Being counted right before God comes through our believing in God.

Belief in God has been exercised all along. Moses now gives testimony that Abram is not accepted or has right standing or is righteous because he has obeyed. He is counted righteous because he has believed. We know that he has the righteousness obtaining kind of faith because he obeys, submits, humbly expresses his concerns to God. Thus the righteousness counted to him is lived out and expressed through the faith that obeys.

So, Moses is showing that the signs and seals of the covenant are given, not to cause faith, but to sustain a faith already exercised. God then is so good and gracious to strengthen our faith this way. While Abram (and Israel’s) faith is strengthened through these visible symbols, we are pointed to the cross as the faith sustaining symbol.

In its New Testament Uses

This text is directly quoted three times in the New Testament. Let’s consider them for a moment. I want to go to them, not to preach those texts to you, but to preach this text *as understood by them* to you.

Justified by Faith

Romans 4:9-24

In Romans, Abram’s righteousness by faith is the model for ours. He is our spiritual model. Paul argues that Moses is showing us in Genesis 15 that:

⁹ Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. ¹⁰ How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. ¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, ¹² and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

¹³ For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 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.” ¹⁹He 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. ²⁰No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²²That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” ²³But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,

Abraham is not justified by works (v.1-8).

If Abraham was declared right before God by the works he did, then he had grounds for boasting. But, the Scriptures in Genesis 15:6 say that Abraham *believed* God and righteousness *was credited* to him. This is what the Scriptures say. So, to have a right standing before God you must turn from trusting your works to believing on and trusting in Jesus Christ. Abraham was not justified by works. David was not justified by works. No one is justified by works. But great will be your joy when you simply embrace Christ alone as your righteousness from God.

Abraham is not justified by circumcision (v.9-12).

Abraham was declared righteous before God by faith *before he was circumcised*. Paul is insisting on is that Abraham was saved while he was still a Gentile. Abraham was not justified by a religious rite. And neither are you.

Abraham is not justified by law (v.13-15).

Paul advances his argument by showing that the promises to Abraham were not a matter of the Law, but of faith. Abraham was not justified by Law. You cannot be justified by the Law.

Abraham is justified by faith (v.16-22).

Justification is by faith so as to uphold faith in God’s promises as bringing us grace, the favor and enabling power of God (v.16-18). Salvation is a promise, a promise to Abraham and to his heirs. Abraham’s faith also models for us believing God’s promises in the face of impossibilities (v.17-19). God calls him out and gives him a promise to be believed and trusted. Abraham believes that promise by faith. Believing God’s promise by faith glorifies God. So God credits righteousness to Abraham’s account (v.22). Abraham believed God’s promises, thus glorifying God and being declared righteous before God by faith. You can be righteous in God’s sight only by faith alone in Christ alone for God’s glory alone.

Abraham is justified for our faith (v.23-25).

How do we leap from Abraham’s faith to our own? The *for us* purpose of the Old Testament is at the center of this paragraph. We read the Old Testament and, like Paul, we see these truths, believe them for ourselves and are counted righteous before God.

Therefore, faith is the instrument by which we are declared righteous by God.

By Faith not Law

Galatians 3:6

⁵Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— ⁶just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

⁷Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸And 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.” ⁹So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

In Galatians, Paul highlights the gospel through the Scripture foreseeing the salvation of the Gentiles. In other words, the exact place of Genesis 15:6 in the Scriptures has a gospel focused reason. Abram is blessed in that he believes God. He receives what was promised through faith. So, we are blessed like Abram was, that is, through faith.

The emphasis is on faith as opposed to Law. To depend on or trust in the Law for salvation or transformation is to misuse the Law. Paul says that Law brings the revelation of sin; faith brings the reality of righteousness.

²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God.

James points back to this text to highlight the surrounding texts. Abram’s faith from Genesis 12 all the way through is plain and evident to all because of what he does. What he does in leaving Ur and Haran, entering Canaan, separating from and then rescuing Lot, giving to Melchizedek and rejecting the reward from the king of Sodom all are Abram’s faith obeying or working. If he does not act as he does, then he does not have the kind of living, authentic faith through which he is counted righteous before God.

In its Present Application

What does all this mean for us? How *do* we take the strangeness and the familiarity of these words and bring them home to our hearts and lives?

You are saved by believing in God’s promise

That is, His promise to forgive your sins because of Jesus’ death and resurrection. You are saved when you hear the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus, when you understand your need of being delivered from your sin and sins, when you believe in God’s promise to apply that work to you if you will bow to Him and call on Him.

You are justified by faith.

Justification is the putting of Jesus’ righteousness to your account. That is done when and through your trusting in God. Believing in God is not itself righteousness. It is how you receive forgiveness and a right standing with God.

You are not justified by works or by religious rites.

You cannot have a right standing with God based on your good works (and certainly not your bad works!). All your own righteousnesses are as filthy rags to God. Nor can you be saved through any religious rite; that is through circumcision, through baptism, through communion or even just the act of coming forward at an invitation. You are saved only by putting your full trust solely in Jesus alone.

Your faith is real if it is producing a growing obedience to God.

As we see from Abram so far, there are advances and obstacles, times of careful obedience and times of failure and sin. But we also see true obedience producing faith. We know Abram has true belief because he has practical internal and external change. You can know if your faith in God is authentic if it produces growing obedience.

The Reality for the Future (v.7-21)

Abram has been concerned that the promise will fail because he has no child. The next big obstacle is something Abram is only dimly beginning to see. He has the promise and is living in the land, but he recognizes that he does not possess it yet. So what about the future? When will he really possess what is promised?

⁷ And he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” ⁸ But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” ⁹ He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” ¹⁰ And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. ¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. ¹³ Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”

A The Covenant Grounded in God (v.7)

Verses 7 and 18-21 are the covenant, the promise, God is making.

In verse 7, God is identifying Himself by what He has done for Abram. God has brought him up out of the land of the Chaldeans and brought him into the promised land. God connects who He is and what He does in order to sustain Abram's faith. He says, "I am the kind of God who accomplishes what He promises." The emphasis is not on the great wisdom or obedience of Abram in making the journey by faith, but rather on the Divine, sovereign purpose and power of God. If I can put it this way, what is important in this covenant is who God is.

God identifies the boundaries of the grant in verses 18-21. This vast bequest was promised to Abram and his descendants. They at various times through history and occupied some, but never all of this land. So there is something greater and later that is in view.

The Concern arising from Faith (v.8)

Abram then asks a question seeking confirmation. What he has so far is the Word of God. He has believed it. He has trusted and trusted in the God who has said it. But God has consistently accompanied His covenants with acts or symbols that visibly represent God's commitment. Abram's is not asking here as a matter of doubt, but as a man who really knows God's ways and is seeking for the signet seal of the covenant.

Further, in his culture, treaties and covenants were "signed" through rites or rituals. This would be like having a signature notarized today. So, he believes God Word and is seeking to have the covenant notarized.

The Confirmation through a Symbol (v.9-21)

All the strangeness of these verses are two things: it is the seal of the covenant and it is the prophecy of how and when the promised land will actually be possessed. Here, the prophetic revelation comes through symbolic images and actions. These words and works will mix prophesy and promises. They will point to a future fulfillment. They will also establish principles that transcend the moment in which they are given.

First, the confirmation comes through the rite of cutting and sacrifice. God tells Abram to bring one of each of the sacrificially clean animals. Each of these animals will later become a part of the Mosaic and Levitical sacrificial system. They are slain, cut in half and laid out so as to be able to walk through between the halves. This was a common rite to secure a treaty or covenant. Once this was done, the carrion birds attempt to attack the carcasses. Abram drives them away.

God is showing Abram and God's people the necessity of protecting the covenant, particularly the sacrifice, from contamination and corruption. He is showing them that there will be vultures who will attempt to destroy what God is doing. Abram is already, in the rescue of Lot, carrying out this responsibility.

Then, in verse 12-16, Abram falls into a deep sleep and is engulfed in a frightening darkness. Then God tells him when Israel will possess the land. The deep sleep represents his own death. He will go to his fathers in peace but not as possessing the land. The dreadful darkness represents the 400 - 430 years from the making of the covenant until the taking of the land, some of which Abram's descendants will live in the land as pilgrims and four generations of which will spent in Egypt. Even as the book of Genesis is being written, Israel is seeing the fulfillment unfold before her very eyes.

In verse 17, God passes in between the halves thus ratifying or notarizing the covenant. But God alone passes through. Thus, Abram knows that this is an unconditional covenant, that God alone will ensure that the covenant will be fulfilled. So, the promises that God had made to Abram from the beginning, are now cut into a covenant, secured by God alone, ratified by the sacrifices. Yet, the fulfillment is a long way off. And longer than they know. But Abram, with a confident faith in God, will die in peace at a ripe old age.

Reflect and Respond

God is teaching Abram lessons we all need to understand.

GOD'S PROMISES ARE ABSOLUTELY SURE. We now have the Lord Jesus' notarization of all God's promises. The authentication seal is the cross, the ink is the blood, the down payment is the Holy Spirit and the reality is an unimaginably wonderful future gazing on and glorying in Christ, serving God in perfection and purity.

GOD MAY FULFILL HIS PROMISES WHEN YOU ARE YET ALIVE. This sounds strange in our ears. Doesn't real faith claim and receive what is promised right now? Sometimes yes. And that is a great mercy and great privilege. And I am so glad and grateful when, asking through faith, I receive what God is pleased to give.

GOD'S PROMISES SOMETIMES REQUIRE HARD WORK. If Israel is going to possess all this land that God has given them, then they are going to have to take, occupy it and defend it. So we are to hear what God has promised, be wise about His providences, trust absolutely in His power, then walk and work in faith.

GOD'S PROMISES REQUIRE PATIENT WAITING. All through the Bible, God is working in an "already but not yet" way. Abram has the promise and is in the land; but he does not yet possess. God's promise is sure even if it is 400 years away, or 1500 years away. We think that if we don't get what God has promised now, something is faulty in our faith.

BELIEVING GOD'S PROMISES MEANS WE WILL TRUST HIM. I am coming full circle here. Many claim to trust in God who do not in fact trust God. Many claim to believe in God's promises who at the same time do not trust God to do what is best when it is best. Do you see the difference? The first unit here is a call to trust in God for the son is coming. The second section here is a call to trust God who will fulfill His promises, but at a time and in a way that is His alone to determine. So, do you trust in Him? And do you trust Him?

BELIEVING GOD'S PROMISES DOES NOT EXCLUDE SUFFERING OR DEATH. Abram and many generations die in faith. But they suffered in Egypt and they died. Brothers and sisters, the best time to cling to God's promises is when it looks least like they are coming true. In difficulty, decline or even in death, trust in God, in what He has said in His Word, what He has promised to us in Christ.

Listen to Hebrews 11:8-16 in closing:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. ¹¹ By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. [ESV]

So, will we be people of faith, people who believe God in an obeying way. Will we long for and look for a heavenly city, a better country? Will we die in faith even if we don't get it all here? If so, then there is a wonderfully amazing result. God will not be ashamed to be called our God.