

ABRAHAM'S OFFSPRING
Genesis 15:1-6

Rev. Richard D. Phillips
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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" (Gen. 15:4).

According to Christians, the central event of all human history was the coming of Jesus Christ, God's Son, into this world. One of the ways we express this is through our use of the terms B.C. and A.D. in our calendars. A.D. means *anno domini*, a Latin phrase meaning "in the year of our Lord", by which we number our years successively from the first Christmas. Prior to that is B.C., that is, *before Christ*, and we add the years up the opposite direction as they precede Jesus' birth. In this way we show that all history is centered on and gains its meaning from the birth of our Lord.

There are people today who think we should abandon this practice. In academic circles it is increasingly popular for history to be divided into CE and BCE, meaning, Common Era and Before Common Era. The word "common" is intended to note the Christian Gregorian calendar as the common standard in the world. Of course, the dating still marks the coming of Jesus Christ, but under this approach Jesus is denied the glory for it. It is a sad commentary on our times that this new approach to dating is gaining headway even among professing Christian scholars, in order to avoid giving offense to other faiths.

However we label our calendars, the fact that Christ's birth stands at the center combats a major misunderstanding regarding God's working in history. You will occasionally hear it said that Jesus was born because God changed his mind or because his initial program for our salvation failed. The argument goes like this: God tried to give

salvation to Israel through the law, but discovered that wouldn't work. To salvage the mess his failure had caused, God came up with the idea of sending his Son to die for our sins. This view presents a flawed God, one capable of failure and folly, and is very far from the picture of God offered in the Bible. But it also misses an important point regarding Christmas, namely, that all of history is centered on the coming of Jesus Christ, and that it was through the coming of his only Son that God always intended to bring salvation to the earth.

ABRAHAM'S CHILD

Our passage this morning presents one of the earliest and most important promises that speak of Christ's coming at Christmas: God's promise to the patriarch Abraham that he would have an offspring through whom salvation would come to him and the world.

Abraham is one of the most important Old Testament figures. It was through him that God began his saving work in the people of Israel. In a very important sense, Christians are saved through faith in Jesus Christ because of God's covenant with Abraham. This is why the New Testament says that those who trust in Christ "are the sons of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7). Abraham, born roughly two thousand years before Christ, was himself saved through faith in Jesus. Christ was born in fulfillment of the promise God made to this great patriarch.

Abraham enters the Bible when God comes to him in Ur of the Chaldees, in modern Iraq, and calls him (then named Abram) to journey as a pilgrim in the far-off land of Canaan. Genesis 12:1-3 says:

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

This was the call that set the history of God's people in motion; Abraham was the first in a line of pilgrims that extends even to us. He had many trials and triumphs as he walked with God. In Genesis 15, God returned to Abram to remind him of his promise to bless and protect him: "The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: 'Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great' (Gen. 15:1). This was to remind Abram, who faced many dangers, of the

divine protection that all of God's people enjoy. Abram, like us, could be sure that by trusting the Lord and doing his will, he would not lose out or be destroyed in that vulnerable place and time.

It was at this point that Abram raised an objection, based, no doubt, upon a prayer request God had not yet answered: "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?'" (Gen. 12:2). How much like us Abram was. God had just guaranteed his future, promising divine blessing and reward. But Abram was dissatisfied because of an unfulfilled need. Though the head of a large and mighty household, he was childless. He had no son to bounce on his knee and, more importantly, to be his heir and carry on his name. We are so like him. If we are Christians, God has sent his Son to die for our sins and to secure for us an eternal inheritance in the heavens. But far from being grateful, we respond, "Sure, but what about my lousy job," "But what about the spouse I have been praying for," "What about this trial or that difficulty I am facing." There is probably nothing more injurious to our relationship with God than our ungrateful and complaining spirit in light of God's wonderful person and all that God has done for us in securing eternal blessings of glory. So it was with Abram; his felt need kept him from worshiping God with thanksgiving and joy.

One of the things we see in this account is how gracious God is. He bears with his complaining children. He sympathizes with our cares and troubles. And God had an answer to Abram's need, which he was willing to discuss. Verse 4 says, "Behold, the word of the Lord came to him: 'This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.'" The Lord assured Abram that Eliezer of Damascus, obviously a man of standing in Abram's household, would not be his heir, for he would have a son of his own. Literally, it says that an offspring from his own flesh would become his heir.

Abram was very old at this time and, more to the point, his wife Sarah was not only barren of womb but also well past child-bearing age. But God, who can do anything, gave Abram a child through Sarah. This is a picture of salvation by grace alone. Abraham went to his aged, barren wife by faith in God's promise, and, where human nature was barren and human effort had failed, as a symbol of sovereign grace, Isaac was born to be his heir.

Yet, even Isaac, born to Abram through the barren womb of Sarah, was not the child of which God was speaking in Genesis 15. According to the New Testament, God was referring to the birth of Jesus Christ, of which the birth of Isaac was a preview.

Abram wanted to know who his heir would be – who would inherit the surpassingly great promises God had given – promises of a land, and a nation to spring from him, and a name that would be great – but couldn't see how it all could come to pass in light his childlessness. God answered that there would be one physical descendant from him in whom the promises would come to pass, and the apostle Paul says that descendant was the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore he says of Christ in 2 Corinthians 1:20, "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him."

This, then, is what Genesis 15:1-6 tells us about Christmas. Jesus Christ was born in fulfillment of God's ancient promise to Abraham. He was born to be the one in whom all of God's promises would be fulfilled – a promised land, a promised people, a promised eternal life and glory. Furthermore, Jesus' birth through Mary's virgin womb should be understood in light of Isaac's birth through Sarah's barren womb. Isaac's birth spoke of salvation by divine grace instead of by human works. Here we have a salvation that is of God alone, a sovereign grace that comes to mankind as a free and precious gift from God, a gift man has done nothing to deserve or produce. Jesus is Abraham's offspring, the answer to all his longings, the fulfillment of God's ancient promise, and the Savior in whom all the world would be blessed.

CHRIST WAS BORN TO SAVE

So far we have learned something from Abraham about who the baby Jesus is. But as we look further in this passage we see what Jesus came to do. Jesus came to save us from our sins, and the first person saved by God's promise of a child to Abraham was Abraham himself. Verse 6 tells us that Abram "believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." This tells us what happens when someone believes that Jesus is the promised Savior of the world: God accepts the believer as righteous in his sight.

The word *righteous*, or *righteousness*, is one of the most important words in all the Bible. Abram is the second person described in the Bible as righteous. The first was Noah. Noah was right with God. As a result, he alone, with his family, was allowed to escape God's judgment in the Great Flood. This tells us that to be righteous in God's sight is to be accepted and approved by God, and thus to avoid God's judgment and wrath. This is the great and urgent need of every single person on earth. Righteousness is a legal statement not merely of innocence but of uprightness, of justification. Genesis 15:6 says that Abram was accounted righteous by God because he believed God's promise regarding salvation through the birth of Jesus Christ.

Verse 6 employs a concept that is central to the Christian faith. It says that Abram was "counted" as righteous. It does not say that he was, in and of himself, righteous. In fact, the Bible's account of Abraham goes out of its way to show that he was quite a healthy sinner. In Genesis 12 we see him being slow in obedience, and then telling lies in Egypt, going so far as to offer his wife to Pharaoh in order to save his own skin. Chapter 16 sees Abram committing adultery with his wife's maidservant because he wasn't willing fully to trust God's promise. Indeed, the Bible has often been criticized because of the sinfulness of its heroes. Opponents of Christianity scoff that God would accept as righteous an lying adulterer like Abraham, a murderer like Moses or a combination adulterer-murderer like King David.

Abraham was not righteous on his own merits. Of course that is why he is important as a model for us, because neither are we. It is the glory of the Bible that in it God offers a way for sinners to be justified through faith in Jesus Christ. Indeed, Abraham is the New Testament's prime example. Paul says of him, "If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'" (Rom. 4:2-3). Abraham's case is given to prove that our righteousness with God is based not on our works, for our works are corrupted by sin, leaving us nothing of our own to boast about. Paul concludes that therefore, "to the one who does not work but trusts [God] who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness" (Rom. 4:4-5). Notice Paul's expression that God "justifies the ungodly": God justifies sinners, by counting them righteous through faith in Christ.

This is what gives so much meaning to Christmas that all the world dates their calendars by the birth of Jesus Christ. God's Son was born of the virgin so as to be free from the corruption of mankind's sin. He was thus able to live a life of perfect righteousness, fulfilling every demand of God's holy expectations, every second of every day. This was Christ's own righteousness, which he offered to God on our behalf when he took up the cross. There, Jesus died in our place, the just for the unjust, offering his righteousness for us and taking to himself the penalty our sins deserved. When we confess our sin and guilt, receiving Christ by faith as our Savior, God credits our sin to him on the cross and credits his righteousness to us. Abram believed on Christ as he was promised and thus was received by God as righteous. We believe on Christ as he has been given, and we receive, as Paul said, "not a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil. 3:9). Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains:

Out of my ledger goes my sin, put to His account; then His goodness, His righteousness, His purity are put into my account under my name! To put it another way, here am I with the black cloak of my sinfulness and I cannot stand, in such a cloak, before God who is light. What God does is to put over my cloak the cloak of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, His perfect spotless life of obedience, His holy nature... God sees me in Him clothed with His righteousness.¹

Genesis 15:6 is an important verse in the Bible; we know this because of the number of times it is referred to in the New Testament. We have already read Romans 4:2-5, where Paul refers to Abraham's justification. Later in that chapter, Paul points out that Abram's faith lay in believing that God would be true to his Word: "He gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was 'counted to him as righteousness'" (Rom. 4:20-21). This makes an important statement regarding faith: we are to believe that God will be true to his Word, however amazing it may seem that God would justify sinners like us. Just as it seemed amazing to Abram that he and Sarah would have a child at their age – we are to take God at his Word and believe the gospel promise.

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Kingdom of God*, 80.

Paul cites this verse again in Galatians 3:6, there showing that we are saved not by our works but, like Abraham, we are saved by faith alone. “So then,” he says, “those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (Gal. 3:9). Finally, James quotes Genesis 15:6, complementing and safeguarding what Paul had taught. Paul emphasized that we must rely on the righteousness that comes through faith instead of trying to be saved by works. James reminds us, however, that Abraham’s faith *did* cause him to obey God. Having been saved through faith apart from works, his faith went on to do good works in gratitude to God for salvation. It is in this sense that James says that “faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 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” (Ja. 2:22-23).

This, then, is how Abraham, though a great sinner, was justified before the holy God. Abraham believed God’s Word. He trusted in what God had promised, namely, a child in whom all the promises would come true. His faith was confirmed over time as it led him to trust God and obey his commands. And by this faith he was accepted by God by means of the righteousness that came through Jesus Christ, by the life and death of the child who was born in fulfillment of God’s promise to Abram.

Another way to put this is to realize that the word in Genesis 15:6 translated “he believed” is the term that gives us our word “Amen.” We say “Amen,” to say, “Yes, it is true.” That is what Abram did when he heard God’s Word. He said, “Amen,” to what God promised, and then added the “Amen” of his life to the “Amen” of his words.

FROM SHAME TO GLORY

Using Genesis 15:1-6 to learn about the meaning of Christmas, we have seen that Christ was born as the child of God’s promise to Abraham, and that Christ to die for our sins in order to justify sinners. This is what was at stake in God’s promise to Abraham, so we are not surprised that the Lord took the time to give an illustration designed to help Abraham believe: “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’” (Gen. 15:5).

Having no children was a source of great shame to Abram. His name meant, “Father of many,” yet he had none. Imagine how many jokes he must have endured on that score. A man in the ancient Near East drew his pride and dignity from the sons he had sired. Abram had no sons and thus no pride or dignity. And yet, it was the promise of God’s grace that Abram would be exalted in just the way he had always been ashamed. Genesis 12:2 says, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great.” In Gen. 15:5, God renews that promise, with a stunning visual demonstration: “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. So shall your offspring be.” If Abram would believe the promise of God’s Word, he would be brought from shame to glory.

This, too, is the story of Christmas. Our Lord Jesus was born in a more bitter humility than Abraham ever knew. The Second Person of the divine Trinity “stripped himself of the robes of his glory, and covered himself with the rags of our humanity.”² Christ, though Almighty God, took up all the infirmities and weakness of our human nature, yet without sin. The Lord of life walked amid the dust of death. The One who could say, “I am the Bread of Life,” allowed himself to hunger. He One who gives living water said, “I thirst.” Jesus was not born in a palace but in a stable, not in the capital of power and influence but in a dreary, rural village. He lay not in a royal bed but in a food-trough for animals. He was clothed not in splendor but was swathed in rags. He entered our weakness and shame, not merely to sympathize with us there but to lead us up into glory. John MacArthur writes: “God put on humanity that we might put on divinity. He became Son of Man that we might become sons of God.”³ What God showed Abram, the gospel that lifts us from shame to glory, is the very thing God showed all the world in the birth and life of Jesus Christ. Paul explains that Christ

made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:7-11).

² Thomas Watson: *A Body of Divinity*, pp. 196.

³ John MacArthur: Hebrews, pp. 9-10.

Christ's birth was the beginning of his humiliation, a humbling that reached its climax at the cross and in the grave. But God raised him up from the dead and exalted him in the highest. Abram, trusting in God's promise in Christ, broken-hearted for his shameful lack of a son, looked up in the sky and saw there a display of all the sons he would have in Christ, those who would follow his example of faith and would join with him in the glorious family of God.

LIGHTS IN THE WORLD

What does this mean for you? What does all this have to say for your celebration of Christmas this year? There are two things that come to my mind, and with them I will conclude. First, if you believe on Jesus Christ, born into this world as the gift of God's grace through the womb of the virgin, then you will find your righteousness with God in him. Jesus Christ was born to save. He came to live the life you should have lived, and die the death you deserve to die. He offers you his own righteousness, his perfect robe of holy glory, so that you may stand with him before God, if you trust in him. I have always loved the line in the song by Rich Mullins, which says, "Sometimes I think of Abraham, how one star he saw had been lit for me." God told Abraham to look up at the stars and see all his spiritual descendants who would join God's family by faith in Christ. If you have trusted Christ to be your Savior, one of those stars was lit just for you. The great imperative of Christmas therefore is to believe on the Lord Jesus and thus to be saved (cf. Acts 16:32).

But there is a second meaning for everyone who has believed, who has already come to God through faith in Christ. You, like Jesus, may live in humility, in want, in poverty, in weakness. Like Abraham, all your dreams have not been fulfilled. But this is just the beginning of a salvation that will end in glory. The birth of Christ was a beginning that leads from shame to glory, from weakness to strength, from defeat to victory, and from condemnation to righteousness and salvation. Therefore, if you are counted righteous through faith in Christ, not only was one of those stars lit for you, but it was a picture of the destiny that lies in store you. Jesus said, "Those who are righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father" (Mt. 13:43). Christ was born into defeat and shame to meet with us there, and to lead us up with him into glory. And as Abraham's children –

children of faith – we enter into his calling, becoming witnesses of the gospel so that all the world might be blessed through us (Gen. 12:2). As the angel told Daniel: “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Dan. 12:3).