

They Speak Of Me

*²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets,
he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.
(Luke 24:27. ESV)*

*³⁹ You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life;
and these are they which testify of Me.
(John 5:39. NKJV)*

Abram Believed The Lord

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Genesis 15:1-6

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to Genesis 15:1-6. Sometimes in a sermon you find yourself dealing with a text that is so rich and so packed with Gospel imagery that you have to go over it 2-3 times in order to do it justice. That is the case here. Scholars agree that this text is absolutely pivotal to our understanding of the Gospel in multiple and different ways. The famous OT scholar Walter Brueggemann says about this text:

It has been utilized by Paul in a distinctive way for his great teaching on justification by faith. There is no doubt that this chapter offers crucial resources for the themes of *faith* and *covenant*.¹

Last week we dealt with the theme of covenant and this week we are going back around for a second pass and we're going to focus on the theme of saving faith. Let me read to you verses 1-6 of Genesis 15. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

Genesis 15:1-6 (ESV)

¹ 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."

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 140.

Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

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

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

There is probably nothing more important than making sure we understand what the Bible means by the word “faith”. In the NT we’re told that we are saved by faith and not by works lest any man should boast; here in the OT we’re told Abram BELIEVED in the Lord and it was counted to him as righteousness – so clearly few things would be more important than understanding what it means to believe in God. What does it mean to be a person of faith? Does it mean simply believing that God exists? Well, no it can’t mean just that, otherwise the devil would be a very good Christian. What does it mean to have faith? That might just be the most important question asked and answered in Holy Scripture and much of how that question is answered in the New Testament is drawn from this particular chapter of the Old Testament. My plan this morning is to present to you a 7 point definition of faith drawn from this chapter and guided by the inspired commentary of the Apostles Paul and James. You may want to keep your Bible open to Genesis 15 while being prepared to regularly dip into Romans 4, Galatians 3 and James 2. Here is how these 4 chapters of Scripture together seem to be answering the question, what is real, Biblical, saving faith?

What Is Real, Biblical, Saving Faith?

The first thing I think we would want to say is that:

1. Faith never comes first; faith responds to an already given grace

Genesis 15 is often treated in the NT as the pivotal moment in Abraham’s journey to faith. But it is quite transparently not the first time that Abraham has had dealings with God. This story takes place in Genesis 15, we met Abraham way back in Genesis 11 and God has been dealing with Abraham for 3.5 chapters before Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. Flip back in your Bibles to Genesis 12. This is usually where we begin to talk about Abram, but notice the story that comes before; what happens in chapter 11? There we find the story of the Tower of Babel. Mankind is in rebellion against God, doing the exact opposite of

what God told them to do, trying to work their way into heaven in defiance of God's Word and so God destroys their labours and disperses them throughout the earth. Abraham was of that race of men. Abram was a rebel and an idolater. That is the context of chapter 11 and it is from hearing those words that we come to hear these words at the start of our story.

Genesis 12:1 (ESV)

¹ Now the LORD said to Abram...

Before Abram had done anything good or bad he was elected out of ruin and given the promises of God. Clearly grace comes before faith. No one ever comes to faith except that they have been marvellously helped by God. Now before you object that this sounds a little Calvinist, you should know that this is not something that separates Calvinists from Arminians. Both John Calvin and John Wesley would affirm that we need God's help to believe, both would affirm that God always initiates and that God's action is always prior to our action – on that we are all agreed. The difference lies in the reason for God's prior action – a discussion we will not engage this morning. This particular point is widely held by everyone who reads their Bible honestly; faith never comes first. Faith responds to an already given grace².

Secondly, we would want to say that:

2. Faith is fuelled by Divine Revelation

Look at verses 1 and 5:

Genesis 15:1 and 5 (ESV)

¹ After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram **in a vision**...

⁵ And he brought him outside and **said**...

Abraham's profession of faith is surrounded by vision and revelation. God showed, God said and Abram believed. Things are no different in the New Testament. The first disciple to profess faith in Jesus Christ was the Apostle Peter, we read about this in Matthew 16:16:

² As per Brueggemann, Genesis, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 146.

Matthew 16:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

But look at what Jesus says about how Peter came to this position of faith:

¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

You didn’t reason your way to this position, you didn’t figure it out – that isn’t how this happened. Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father who is in heaven. Faith is always fuelled and enabled by revelation, Old Testament and New. The Apostle Paul says the same thing in Romans 10:

Romans 10:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Faith explodes in response to revelation, but the Scripture is equally clear that something more than mere hearing is required. Many people heard the teaching of Jesus but not everyone believed. That’s why after many of his parables Jesus would say:

Matthew 11:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Not everyone has ears to hear – indeed having ears to hear appears to be a special grace of God in the Bible; you read about that this last Tuesday in your RMM readings. In Deuteronomy 29:4 it says:

Deuteronomy 29:4 (ESV)

⁴ But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.

Many people in Moses’ day were not believing the promises of God because the Lord had not given them a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear. This is why point #1 and point #2 have to go together. Grace and revelation together are what give birth to saving faith. The Word goes forth like gasoline over the people – that’s revelation – but in many cases, nothing happens because there is no Divine spark. But in the heart of the one, or in the heart of the many there is a spark of grace given by God and that which is NOW HEARD gives birth to the faith that saves.

So it was with Abraham and so it is with all who come to God in faith. Faith is born of revelation and grace. It is doubly a gift from God.

Thirdly,

3. Faith is believing in the Word of God in the face of conflicting evidence

That's the obvious and perhaps most immediate point being made in these 6 verses. You remember that God had spoken words of promise to Abraham focused ultimately on a coming Seed but thus far nothing has happened. Abraham is getting older, his wife Sarah is drifting further and deeper into menopause and everything Abraham knows about human biology and reproductive process indicates now that this promise is past the point of reasonable expectation. It is starting to look ridiculous and irrational. And of course, that is the point. Faith is always, by definition, formed in tension with material observation. What we are called upon to believe appears to be in conflict with what we see.

Peter commented on this. Abraham needed faith to hold on to his expectation of the coming Seed – our situation is no different. We're waiting for Jesus to come too and we hold that faith against the testimony of our eyes and often against the convictions of our culture:

2 Peter 3:4 (ESV)

⁴ They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation."

Our eyes and our culture will say: "There is no evidence to support the things that you believe! Prove to me that what you believe is rational! Give me something I can see or something I can touch!" We live in a world that worships the discernment of the eye. That's what science is; it is the practice of observation, hypothesis and conclusion. It is the authority of man's eye to determine reality and it has always demanded our allegiance.

That is exactly the challenge being faced by Abraham! God said that many children are going to come and in particular one child, the Seed will come and yet Abraham sees his own body decaying, he sees his wife's body decaying and he wonders how what he sees can be reconciled

with what he has been told to believe. That is the challenge of faith. To walk by faith and not by sight.

Now let me be clear, I am not saying that science is the enemy – far from it. I love penicillin and I love my flush toilet. Praise God for science! I'm just saying that faith involves making a decision about who you will believe when you're being told to trust something that is not entirely verified by the things you can see with your eyes. Brueggeman is again helpful at this point. He says about this moment in Abraham's life:

Abraham has repented. He has abandoned a reading of reality which is measured by what he can see and touch and manage.³

Ultimately the question being asked in this and every other crisis of faith is: how will you determine truth? Who will be your ultimate authority? Will you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil so that you can be like God deciding right and wrong for yourself? Or will you trust in the Word of the Lord? God tests that by permitting contradictory evidence. Sarah was old, Abraham was old. Sarah had stopped having her period. She was post-menopausal. That's a bad thing for a couple wanting to have a child. If Abraham were to continue believing in the Word of God about this coming Seed, henceforth, it would have to be taken on faith. Faith is believing in the face of conflicting evidence. As it was for Abraham, so will it be for us.

Fourthly, we want to notice that:

4. Faith is a form of humility

Paul makes that point in Romans 4, commenting on this text:

Romans 4:2-5 (ESV)

² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

³ For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.

⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,

³ Ibid., 144.

Paul is talking about boasting here – what do you trust in, what do you boast in? He says that the arrogant man boasts in his good works and he means to boast about them before God on Judgement Day. He means to tell God how faithfully he served as an usher and how much he gave to the poor and Paul is eager to say that people should never boast before God. Don't give God your resume on Judgement Day! Fall on their faces and plead the grace of God. Faith in that sense, is a form of humility. It is saying to God: "I need to receive from you that which you alone can provide in order that I might live before you. Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling". It is gross arrogance to think that we can merit anything in the eyes of a perfect and holy God. The person of faith puts all their hope and all their trust in the things that are promised and given by God.

Fifthly, we notice that:

5. Faith seeks reward from God

We mentioned two weeks ago that in the story of Melchizedek there is an obvious contrast between the King of Sodom and the King of Salem, the Priest of God Most High. The King of Sodom offers Abraham a share in the spoils of war, but Abraham declares that he has taken an oath to receive nothing from Sodom and instead he makes his choice to seek blessing from God alone. Now here again, after these things as verse 1 says, this theme of reward is introduced once more:

Genesis 15:1 (ESV)

¹ 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.**"

You might be tempted to think that the theme of "reward" is an Old Testament theme, but we find it again and again in the teaching of Jesus. Jesus said that one of the biggest decisions we make in life, indeed, a FAITH decision, is the issue of from whom we will seek our reward. That is a running theme in Matthew 6 for example.

Matthew 6:1-2 (ESV)

¹ "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for **then you will have no reward** from your Father who is in heaven.

² "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, **they have received their reward.**

All throughout the NT, the idea of reward is interwoven with the concept of faith. Consider for example Hebrews 11:6:

Hebrews 11:6 (ESV)

⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists **and that he rewards** those who seek him.

Clearly there is nothing wrong with desiring reward. God is a good God and he wants to give us good things. The issue is where and how you pursue those good things. From Sodom or Salem? By work or by faith? That is the issue. Let me illustrate.

Let me share what I most want for myself. I'm not trying to make myself the focus of the sermon here, I'm just trying to illustrate and I think what I'm about to say could be said by just about every other Christian person in this church but for the purposes of illustration I'll say these things in the first person. Here is my "wish list" if you will, here is what I most want to receive as my treasure and reward:

1. I want to know and enjoy the Presence of the Lord.
2. I want to enjoy the Lord in the presence of healthy family and friends.
3. I want to have a secure home and a well supplied table.
4. I want to do work that glorifies God and contributes to human flourishing.
5. I want to enjoy times of rest and recreation in the natural beauty of God's creation.

I want those things. I desire them and as I look at that list I find that not one of those desires is a sin. Not one. In fact I find that at one point or another in the Bible the desire of such things is validated and affirmed so I find no cause for guilt or shame in that list. The issue however, is how I choose to secure those things. God says that he will give them to me in Christ. That is a promise of the Bible, I could give you a verse for each of those but for the sake of time I'll just read one verse that addresses the whole list:

Ephesians 1:3 (ESV)

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with **every spiritual blessing** in the heavenly places,

Paul says that God gives us every good thing in Christ – everything on my list is a good thing, there are verses in Isaiah 65-66 and Revelation 21-22 which address each of those things and here I am being told I can have those things in Jesus Christ. But here is the test of faith. Suppose 1 or more of those items is withheld from me in this present life. Suppose I am too poor to afford a secure home and a well supplied table? Will I steal in order to survive? Suppose I have a dead end job that seems to have no purpose and does nothing obvious for the good of humanity, will I be consumed with bitterness and envy? Suppose I can't afford to travel and see beautiful places? Will I rob God of my tithes and offerings so that I can see and enjoy that which he failed to give me? Suppose I have a sick wife or no wife – will I take that which is not given to me in order to indulge in forbidden pleasure? Will I seek blessing from Sodom when Salem fails to deliver? Will I ensure that I enjoy in this life all that I mean to enjoy? Into that faith decision Jesus whispers:

Matthew 16:26 (ESV)

²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?

That is the question that faith has to answer. Do you believe that every good thing is out there in God for you? Or will you make a deal with the devil? Will you live in Sodom in order to be well supplied? How you answer that question reveals the state of your soul. It reveals whether you have faith like Abraham or the faith of a fool.

Sixthly:

6. Faith finally manifests in proving works and service

Here is where the Apostle James is particularly helpful. Turn to James 2. In 2:17 James is making an important point:

James 2:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

James obviously is trying to help people distinguish between saving faith and dead faith. Not all faith is saving faith. We know that. Jesus said many people are going to say to him on judgement day, “Lord, Lord” and he’s going to say to them, “I never knew you”. (Matthew 7:21-

23) There is such a thing as false faith and the New Testament warns us about that, time and time again. James here says that one sure way to tell live faith from dead faith is by looking for proving works. Real faith always manifests in proving works and service. Then in verses 21-24 he uses this story of Abraham as an illustration. He says:

James 2:21-24 (ESV)

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.

²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

This passage sometimes makes people nervous because of that last line “not by faith alone”. After all the entire Protestant Reformation was waged over the principle that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone because of Christ alone but here James says “not by faith alone”. Is this a problem? And of course it is not. Luther and Calvin had read James. Calvin clarified things by saying: “It is faith alone that saves us, but the faith that saves us is never alone.” The key line in this passage is found at the end of verse 22:

faith was completed by his works (v. 22b.)

The full flowering of Abraham’s faith was his remarkable act of obedience and sacrifice in offering Isaac on the altar – but when did that happen? In Genesis 22 – long after Abram believed in the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness. The point that James is trying to make is that faith – if its real faith – always shows up in subsequent acts of obedience and service. Faith shows itself in works or it was never truly faith. That’s what he’s saying. We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves us is never alone. It always, finally shows up in proving works and service.

And then lastly and we close with this,

7. Faith is the means by which we are reconciled to God

Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. Righteousness means right standing with God – what theologians call “justification”. Abram believed God and God declared him to be righteous. Somehow, Abraham was back in Eden, before the fall, at peace

with his Creator. What just happened? What happened was what Luther called the great exchange. Calvin is helpful again here. Commenting on this verse he says:

Faith borrows a righteousness elsewhere, of which we, in ourselves, are destitute.⁴

Earlier in the same section of commentary he says:

Abram was received into the number and rank of just persons, by the imputation of righteousness.⁵

That's what imputation is, in a nutshell. It is grabbing hold of a righteousness elsewhere by faith. By faith we trust that God will pay for our sins in his own blood – that faith was forward faith for Abraham in Genesis 15, while for us it is backward faith, but the object is the same. We by faith entrust our sin to God and we by faith lay hold of a righteousness from elsewhere. An alien righteousness. A righteousness from God in Christ. That's what faith does. That's what faith IS! Faith is the hand that reaches out to receive from God that which God has provided for our forgiveness and redemption. In that sense, it is not faith that saves us, it is Christ that saves us. Think of it this way. Think of the blood of Christ as being contained in a cup. It is the blood that saves us and yet we must take hold of that cup and drink it to the dregs. The hand that takes the cup is faith – it reaches for a righteousness elsewhere. But it is ultimately the content of the cup that saves us.

You see, you cannot put faith in whatever you like and be saved. It is ultimately faith rightly directed at Jesus Christ upon the cross – whether you are looking forward like Abraham, or backwards like us – it is faith directed at Christ that is ultimately credited as righteousness. This is the gift of God, lest any man should boast.

Conclusion:

Abraham in this story is very much the model of faith. This is what humanity was supposed to be, way back in the very beginning. A creature that believes God and takes God at his Word. A creature that trusts God not to withhold any good thing that he has promised. A creature that eats

⁴ John Calvin, *Genesis*, Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 407.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 405.

from God's hand and serves the Lord with gladness. You can be that creature again by the grace and mercy of God. He has made a way.

Pray then and ask God to strengthen your hand to receive what he has provided. Pray and ask God to open your eyes, unstop your ears and soften your heart to believe the implanted and saving Word. Take the cup. Drink it in faith. This is the Gospel, Old Testament and New, and this is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God.