

Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 18, 2015
Genesis 15:1-7

In Christ Jesus, whose righteousness has been credited to us by God's grace through faith, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

We begin this morning's sermon with a true and false quiz. There are three statements:

- 1) **God forgives us our sins because His kindness and love moves Him to overlook them.** T/F
- 2) **God forgives the sins of those who by their conduct show themselves worthy of forgiveness.** T/F
- 3) **We receive forgiveness of sins and get to heaven by believing in Christ and doing good works.** T/F

Hold on to your answers, we'll come back to these questions later in the sermon.

So far this Epiphany season we have been following the life of Abraham. We have seen how the Lord called Abraham and how he faithfully responded to the Lord's command to leave his family and country and go to the place that God would show him. We saw his humble faith in action as he settled the dispute between himself and his nephew Lot over the crowded grassland. What a selfless, trusting, Christ-like spirit Abraham demonstrated.

Well this morning we see Abraham filled with worry and doubt. Our text begins with these words: **AFTER THESE THINGS THE WORD OF THE LORD CAME TO ABRAM IN A VISION, SAYING, "DO NOT BE AFRAID, ABRAM. I AM YOUR SHIELD, YOUR EXCEEDINGLY GREAT REWARD."** Now one might think that those words should have been spoken to Abraham before he left for Canaan and before he settled the argument with Lot. "Abraham, don't be afraid, I'll be your protection and your shield." But these words are spoken after he left his family and homeland and after he selflessly gave Lot the best land.

Abraham knew that God had blessed him greatly. He knew that only when the **LORD** was His protection and His shield could he face the future without fear. He also knew that all of his goods and wealth were nothing compared to the peace, contentment and joy he had knowing God as His Friend and Provider.

But what he wanted most, he did not have! God had promised him a descendant, a child from whom would come the Messiah, the Savior of all of mankind. That promised link between Abraham and the Savior was still missing and years were passing by. Both he and Sarah were now beyond the years of child bearing and as each day, month and year went by it seemed more and more unlikely that this promise would ever be fulfilled. Abraham was afraid, afraid that he would never have a child of his own and would have to adopt his head servant Eliezer as his heir. He was getting older; he didn't know how many more years he would live. What if he died before he had a child. He was troubled, puzzled and worried.

And he told God about his fears. We read, **BUT ABRAM SAID, "LORD GOD, WHAT WILL YOU GIVE ME, SEEING I GO CHILDLESS, AND THE HEIR OF MY HOUSE IS ELIEZER OF DAMASCUS?" ... LOOK, YOU HAVE GIVEN ME NO OFFSPRING, INDEED ONE BORN IN MY HOUSE IS MY HEIR!"** For Abraham to go childless would mean to lose the inheritance God had promised, unless God meant it to be through his servant who was born in his house but not to him or Sarah. Abraham was worried and fearful.

So God spoke directly to Abraham's fear. What a difference between Abraham's "Look God," and God's "Look Abraham." God in essence is saying, "Get rid of that idea that Eliezer is to be your heir. The heir I'm speaking about and that I promised you will be from your flesh and blood." Then the Lord takes Abraham outside of his tent and says, **"LOOK NOW TOWARD HEAVEN, AND COUNT THE STARS IF YOU ARE ABLE TO NUMBER THEM...SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE."**

Do you see the difference? Abraham said, "Look Lord, I am childless, You have given me no offspring." He was full of fear and doubt!

But God responds, "Look Abraham, at the stars in the sky so great shall your descendants be."

God was filled with promises and assurances!

And what was the result? **AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED IN THE LORD, AND HE ACCOUNTED IT TO HIM FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS.** This verse has been called the most important verse in the Bible. It stands out like a mountain peak, forming the **GREAT DIVIDE** between all other religions of the world and the one true religion of Jesus Christ. As we said last week, the Apostle Paul makes this verse the very cornerstone of his theology, basing long portions of both his letters to the Romans and to the Galatians on it. For these few words emphasizes the fact that Abraham was counted, looked upon as righteous in God's eyes, not because of anything he did or was, not because of his noble character or his upright nature, not because of any merit or worthiness in him; but solely because he believed in, he trusted, he clung to the promises of His God.

The word for believe in the Hebrew is the word which we use to end our hymns and prayers. It is **AMEN!** Abraham said **AMEN**, to God's promise. Literally it means, "to prop up, to sustain or support, to be steadfast, secure, sure, firm, unshaken." It means saying **SO IT WILL BE** to God's promises. To believe then is more than just trusting in God's power, but it is trusting in His promises, taking Him at His Word. We believe, we are sure and certain that God has sent His Son into this world to be our perfect Substitute in keeping the law and to be our substitutionary Sacrifice as full payment for our sins. Through this faith God credits Christ's righteousness to us as our own.

The word **RIGHTEOUSNESS** literally means: **BEING RIGHT WITH GOD.** Abraham did not gain this right standing with God by what he had done (leaving his home and family) or ever could do, but he gained this right standing with God by what His great Descendant would do. God saves sinners not by transforming them into holy, righteous people, but by declaring them holy and righteous through Jesus. Notice Abraham's faith did not make him righteous, it did not change his character so that from now on he was without sin. He was counted as righteous. God regarded him as righteous, even while he was still sinful.

To the world this is not only absurd and unheard of, but also unfair. To natural man it can never seem right that God would justify (that is: **declare righteous**) a sinner who believes in Jesus and yet condemn to eternal damnation a relatively good and upright, honest and caring person who does not believe in Jesus. But we must remember that faith has no intrinsic value in and of itself, it is not faith that saves but the object of our faith that saves. It is Jesus Christ who saves. Faith simply clings to Jesus, relies on Him, believes in Him. Paul picks up this same point in Romans 4:2-5 **FOR IF ABRAHAM WAS JUSTIFIED BY WORKS, HE HAS SOMETHING OF WHICH TO BOAST, BUT NOT BEFORE GOD. FOR WHAT DOES THE SCRIPTURE SAY? ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD AND IT WAS ACCOUNTED TO HIM FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS. NOW TO HIM WHO WORKS, THE WAGES ARE NOT COUNTED AS GRACE BUT AS DEBT. BUT TO HIM WHO DOES NOT WORK BUT BELIEVES ON HIM WHO JUSTIFIES THE UNGODLY, HIS FAITH IS ACCOUNTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS.**

Why can't natural man believe this? Because he doesn't know that God's Word clearly tells us that holy, righteous God demands not just our good attempts, our striving after moral living, being honest and trying our best---God demands **PERFECT OBEDIENT LOVE!**

Faith in Jesus Christ then also means believing that we are spiritually dead, lost and condemned sinners, who cannot keep God's Law, who cannot do a single thing to save ourselves, but must confess that we sin daily in thought, word and deed. Such saving faith has no room for any thoughts of our earning or meriting or deserving righteousness by our own works. To believe the promises of God is the very opposite of trying to earn God's love by our own good works.

Abraham's faith rested upon God's Word of promises and so must our faith. That's the only foundation for faith. My feelings are not a reliable foundation for my faith. Feelings and emotions can and do mislead. Abraham's feelings and emotions left him worried and fearful as he looked at his uncertain future and wondered what would be in store for him. But his heart rested upon God's Word of promise.

So also our feelings and emotions may lead us to worry, doubt and wonder if God really does love us, if we really are forgiven, if He really does care for us, if we really will go to heaven. Solomon said it many years ago: **TRUST IN THE LORD WITH ALL YOUR HEART AND LEAN NOT ON YOUR OWN UNDERSTANDING.**

In 1510 Martin Luther was sent to Rome. As an obedient monk at the time he was excited about

going to the holy city of Rome. He had already read in Romans 1:17 these words: **THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.** Yet as a good priest and monk he too believed in the false teachings of the church of his day. He visited the relics, he knelt before the shrines, he even said that he wished his parents were dead so that he might have pleaded for the deliverance of their souls from purgatory. One day as he was on his knees climbing up the Holy Steps--these were said to be the very same steps which Jesus had walked on to enter Pilate's house---suddenly he heard in his mind the words: **THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH!** Immediately he got up and realized how foolish he had been. Righteousness is not earned, it is credited through faith in Jesus Christ.

We just finished singing these powerful words of faith: **JESUS, THY BLOOD AND RIGHTEOUSNESS MY BEAUTY ARE, MY GLORIOUS DRESS; MIDST FLAMING WORLDS, IN THESE ARRAYED, WITH JOY SHALL I LIFT UP MY HEAD. BOLD SHALL I STAND IN THAT GREAT DAY, FOR WHO AUGHT TO MY CHARGE SHALL LAY? FULLY THRO' THESE ABSOLVED I AM FROM SIN AND FEAR, FROM GUILT AND SHAME.**

So true or false: **God forgives us our sins because his kindness moves Him to overlook them.**

FALSE

True or false: **God forgives the sins of those who by their conduct show themselves worthy of forgiveness.** **FALSE**

True or false: **We receive forgiveness of sins and get to heaven by believing in Christ and doing good works.** **FALSE**

The only truth is the words of Scripture: **GOD MADE JESUS WHO KNEW NO SIN TO BE SIN FOR US, THAT WE MIGHT BECOME THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IN HIM...HE IS THE ATONING SACRIFICE FOR OUR SINS, AND NOT ONLY FOR OURS BUT ALSO FOR THE SINS OF THE WHOLE WORLD...GOD WAS IN CHRIST RECONCILING THE WORLD TO HIMSELF, NOT IMPUTING THEIR TRESPASSES TO THEM. Therefore, TO HIM WHO DOES NOT WORK BUT BELIEVES ON HIM WHO JUSTIFIES THE UNGODLY, HIS FAITH IS ACCOUNTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS.**

Thank God this unbelievable message is true. Amen.