

“The Most Important Truths of All”

Genesis 15:1-21

July 17th, 2016

Children’s Sermon:

Let’s say we’re planning a birthday party for someone. *What are some important things we need to have for a birthday party?*

* * a place, cake, ice cream, decorations, presents, candles, invitations, friends/family, games.

Just like there are important things to have for a good birthday party, there are important spiritual truths we must know if we are to act/live in a way that makes God happy.

We learn what some of those are in the Bible verses for today’s sermon. *Who remembers the man we’ve been learning about the last couple of Sundays?* Abram. In today’s passage, God comes to Abram and teaches him some important spiritual truths – faith, justification, and covenant.

The *Children’s Catechisms* help us here:

* *What does it mean to believe (or have faith) in Christ?* “To trust in Christ alone for my salvation.” (Faith!)

* *What is justification?* “It is God’s forgiving sinners, and treating them as if they had never sinned.”

* *How does God justify you?* “God forgives all my sins and accepts me as righteous through Christ.”

* *What is a covenant?* “A relationship that God establishes with us and guarantees by his word” (or ‘an agreement between two or more persons.’)

Faith, justification, and covenant are very important Bible truths. They tell us how we should live as God’s children. You can remember them by their initials (**Ffaith, Justification, Covenant) – **FJC** - **For Jesus Christ!****

The chapter of Scripture before us this morning is crucial, among the most important in the entire Bible. Following the **first** chapter of Genesis, which tells us of the creation of all things by the eternal and self-existent God, and the **third** chapter of Genesis, which tells us of the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, the next great pivotal chapter of the Old Testament is **Genesis 15**, our text today. “By many standards it is the greatest, for it tells of Abram’s justification by grace through faith and records the official covenant established with him by God...” (Boice, 539)

Genesis 15:1-21:

“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.”

²But Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house *is* Eliezer of Damascus?” ³Then Abram said, “Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!”

⁴And behold, the word of the LORD *came* to him, saying, “This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.” ⁵Then He brought him outside and said, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

⁶And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

⁷ Then He said to him, “I *am* the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.”

⁸ And he said, “Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?”

⁹ So He said to him, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” ¹⁰ Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. ¹¹ And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹² Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror *and* great darkness fell upon him. ¹³ Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land *that is* not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years.

¹⁴ And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites *is* not yet complete.”

¹⁷ And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. ¹⁸ On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying:

“To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates— ¹⁹ the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

As we work through this this chapter, we can’t forget what we learned from the 14th chapter. There, we learned Abram’s nephew Lot was captured by a confederacy of 4 nations who were asserting their influence throughout the Land of Canaan. Probably unknown to them, Abram had a strike force of 318 servants trained for war. Abram traveled many miles leading his army in a daring night raid, rescuing Lot and his family from captivity.

MP 1 – God’s Promise to Abram (v. 1-5);

MP 2 – God’s Program for Restoring Fallen Sinners (v. 6);

MP 3 – God’s Provision for Abram and his seed (v. 7-21)

This chapter is rich in Christian doctrine. We’ll focus our attention on three doctrines – **faith**, **justification**, and **covenant**. The chapter begins in verse 1 with God encouraging Abram, ““Do not be afraid, Abram. I *am* your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”

What would Abram have to be afraid of? A likely possibility is that the four kings he rescued Lot from might return with reinforcements and attack Abram’s camp. Perhaps Abram wondered, *if he were killed, what would happen to God’s promise to make him (Abram) into a great nation?* God’s remedy for Abram’s fear was to remind him who He (God) was – He was Abram’s “shield and great reward.” “God’s I AM is perfectly adequate for man’s “I am not.” (Wiersbe, 45)

Abram reveals his concern for God’s promise when he questions God about his lack of an heir. Abram was getting up in age; his biological clock was ticking! **Genesis 16**, which we’ll examine next Sunday, tells us that Abram was 85 years old at this point. Abram was right in taking this problem to God. But there are poor ways in which we can ask God questions. One of those is asking defiantly. God is not bound to answer our defiance. There doesn’t seem to be any defiance in Abram’s words in verses 2-5.

It is interesting to note how God responds to Abram's questions –God clarified His promise and then He expanded His promise. God clarified the promise by explaining that Eliezer was not the promised heir because Abram would produce an heir from his body. He would father him!

God expanded His promise to Abram by adding a comparison involving stars. God instructed Abram to look at the innumerable stars in the night sky. Abram's heirs would likewise be innumerable!

As we apply this first point, we should be encouraged that even when life is dark, we can still see the stars. Someone has well said, "When the outlook is bleak, try the uplook." God pointed Abram's attention up instead of down. One of our problems is that we are always looking down or, at best, around. Essentially, when we do this, we are looking at ourselves and that leads to doubt, insecurity, and confusion.

Having been reminded of **God's Promise to Abram**, we move to verse 6, surely among the most important verses in all of Scripture. (I've heard it referred to as the "**John 3:16** of the Old Testament.") Verse 6 portrays **God's Program for Restoring Fallen Sinners**. "And he (Abram) believed in the LORD, and He (God) accounted it to him (Abram) for righteousness."

Abram exercised faith when he believed God. The Hebrew word translated "believed" here means 'to lean your whole weight upon.' Abram took God at His Word.

In the middle of the night in a small Midwest farming community, the two-story house of a young family caught fire. Quickly everyone made their way through the smoke-filled house out into the front yard. Everyone that is, except a 5-year old boy.

The father looked up to the boy's room and saw his son crying at the window, rubbing his eyes.

The father knew better than to re-enter the house to rescue his son, so he yelled, "Jump, son! I'll catch you." Between sobs, the boy responded to the voice he knew so well. "But I can't see you!"

The father answered with great assurance. "No, Son, you can't, but I can see you!" The boy jumped and landed safe in his father's arms. The boy had faith in his father.

Abram knew that God says what He means, and He means what He says. He was a man of faith.

Faith is the instrument through which we receive the **righteousness** of God. And, righteousness is our greatest need because apart from God in Christ, not a one of us *is* righteous (**Romans 3:10**). Righteousness is conforming to the standard of what is right in God's eyes. It is the correct action and attitude before God.

This righteousness is not within us. It comes to us from Another – the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 6 teaches here that the righteousness that Abram received from God was "accounted to him." Perhaps the version of the Bible you use says here, "counted to him" or "credited to him."

The Bible's term for this accounting or crediting is "justification." It means pronouncing a person righteous before God. Justification is by **faith**, meaning faith in Jesus as God's provision for our sin. Justification is God declaring the believer in Jesus Christ to be righteous, not on the basis of our own works, but on the basis of Christ's sacrifice.

Since the time of the first sin by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, there is great misunderstanding among people concerning how they escape an eternity in hell. The typical person today believes that when their life on earth comes to an end, they will be in heaven. *How?* Because they died. Justification by death is a lie from the pit of hell; it is not a defensible position from Scripture.

If God were to ask you what right you have to enter heaven, what would your answer be?

Many people say something like this, "I've been a pretty good person. I've never done anything very bad. I give to charities. On the whole, I've done the best I can."

In response to such an answer, the Bible says in **Romans 3:20** – "...by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in (God's) sight..." Actually, relying upon our own works is how we got into trouble with God in the first place – even our best works are tainted by our sin! No, we cannot point to what we have done, we must rely upon the works of a Savior who is without sin.

And that Savior is Jesus Christ. The only acceptable answer to the question, "what right have I to enter heaven?" is by what Jesus Christ has done. Jesus died for me. He died in my place. I trust Him. I trust His work on my behalf. I stand before you, not in my own sin and unrighteousness, but in the Person of Jesus Christ."

So, which is it for you, dear one? Are you trusting in Jesus to supply your every need, to include eternal salvation? Or are you trusting in your own good works? If you don't know for sure, please let me or a trusted Christian friend know how to live for Jesus, now and forever.

We've seen **God's promise to Abram** and **God's program for restoring fallen sinners**. The last point is **God's provision for Abram and his seed**.

Because Abram lacked assurance in God's promise, God goes the extra mile, so to speak. Abram already had the promise; now God enters into a covenant with Abram. Covenant is more than a promise. "Covenant is what God does when He gets formal about a promise. Covenant is the wrapper God puts around His promise to help you believe it; it's God putting handles on His promises." (Davis, 60)

Here in **Genesis 15:9-17**, we look in on a ratification ceremony where animals are sacrificed, split in half, and God passed through the pieces (the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch represent God - think of Israel in the wilderness following the pillar of fire by night and the pillar of smoke by day). We gain some understanding of this ceremonial rite from a reading of **Jeremiah 34:15-20**. There, the Hebrews make a covenant with God that said He would save them from their enemy, the Babylonians, if they released their Hebrew slaves. As a sign and seal of the agreement, the Hebrews marched between pieces of animals that had been cut in two.

The purpose of such a ritual is to invoke a curse if the participants do not keep their covenantal promises. God says here that He would rather destroy Himself than prove unfaithful to His people. God Himself is willing to suffer the curse of the covenant.

The ceremony would have provided Abram with assurance, and it stands yet today to do the same for us!

Friends, isn't that incredible news? In a world where so many bad things are happening all around us – another Muslim terrorist attack in France, an attempted military coup in Turkey, shootings between police officers and suspected wrong-doers, a dysfunctional political situation in the State of Illinois, and a seemingly hopeless struggle for leadership of the federal government – we have the sure and true promises of Almighty God to see us through this life and the next one!

God promised to bless Abram, and to bless others through Him. He also promised to bring many descendants to Abram. You are one of Abram's descendants if you are a believer in Jesus Christ. His progeny is a long line of godly men and women who trust in Jesus Christ and Him alone for their salvation. God will bless, and He will continue to bless, you and others through you.

MP 1 – God's Promise to Abram (v. 1-5) (to protect him, to bring a son through him, and to give him descendants without number);

MP 2 – God's Program for Restoring Fallen Sinners (v. 6) Granting faith to those whom God has chosen for Himself, declaring us to be right in His sight because of Jesus' righteousness on our account);

MP 3 – God's Provision for Abram and his seed (v. 7-21) God entering into a covenant with Abram and his descendants that can never be broken because He has sworn to do so on Himself.

A young boy by the name of James had a desire to be the most famous manufacturer and salesman of cheese in the world. He planned to become rich and famous by making and selling cheese. He began with a little buggy pulled by a pony named Paddy.

After making his cheese, James would load his wagon, and he and Paddy would drive down the streets of Chicago to sell the cheese. As the months passed, James began to despair because he was not making any money, in spite of his long hours and hard work. One day he pulled his pony to a stop and began to talk to him. He said, "Paddy, there is something wrong. We are not doing it right. I'm afraid we have things turned around and our priorities are not where they ought to be. Maybe we ought to serve God and place Him first in our lives."

The boy drove home and made a covenant that for the rest of his life he would first serve God and then would work as God directed. Many years after this, the young boy, now a man, commented, "I would rather be the most insignificant member in the church than to head the greatest corporation in America. My first job is serving Jesus."

So, every time you take a bite of Philadelphia Cream cheese, sip a cup of Maxwell House coffee, mix a quart of Kool-Aid, slice up a DiGiorno Pizza, cook a pot of Macaroni & Cheese, spread some Grey Poupon, stir a bowl of Cream of Wheat, slurp down some Jell-O, eat the cream out of the middle of an Oreo cookie, or serve some Stove Top, remember a boy, his pony named Paddy, and the promise that young James L. Kraft made to serve God and work as He directed.