

Genesis: *Believing God*
Genesis 15:1-6

There is a big difference between believing in God and believing God. This morning we will see how Abram believed God, but not before expressing his fears, doubts and concerns in a way that was acceptable to God. So, with no further ado, let us resume our journey through Genesis as we stand to read Genesis 15:1-6:

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

My message will fall under four subheadings: 1) A Predictable Let-down; 2) Asking In Faith; 3) God’s Promise of Assurance; and 4) Believing God.

I. A Predictable Let-down

The first verse in the 15th chapter Genesis acknowledges a reality that I find to be common, and here it is: following a season of spiritual intensity, there is often a season of predictable let-down. This tendency is famously observed in the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 18-19. If you recall that story, in 1 Kings 18 Elijah demonstrates tremendous courage and faithfulness in facing down the prophets of Baal. By faith, he prays to God and God responds by sending fire from heaven to consume a saturated altar. By faith, Elijah prays and God sends rain in the midst of a drought. Chapter 18 concludes with these words, “And the hand of the LORD was on Elijah...”!

But then, immediately after those events, when we turn to chapter 19, Elijah learns that Queen Jezebel has vowed to have Elijah killed, and we read in vs. 3ff: Then Elijah was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life...he went a day’s journey into the wilderness and came and sat under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my forefathers.”

I suspect that Abram is facing a similar let-down after his adventures in Genesis 14. Think about it: Abram just spent a great deal of time operating at a high degree of faith. He pursued the four kings and their armies who had abducted his nephew, Lot. He led 318 men against thousands, and God delivered his enemies into his hands. Then, upon returning, Abram continued to walk in faith. When offered the spoils of war by the wicked king of Sodom, Abram refused to keep a single thread of anything belonging to Sodom in order to honor God’s glory. Upon receiving the blessing of the priest/king Melchizedek, Abram faithfully tithed of his bounty and gave the rest of the spoils back to the citizens of Sodom and his hosts in Mamre.

But then, the next day, or the next week, or the next month...it was back to normal, everyday life. It was then, when all the battle was over and all the testing of his faith had subsided, that fear began to creep into Abram’s heart. “What if the four kings return with an even

greater army to avenge themselves? What if they return and burn the whole region to the ground and slaughter all the citizens of that region?" We can imagine all the "what-ifs" that now haunt Abram and his wife, Sarai.

I so relate with these biblical stories. As a pastor, I have experienced many seasons of great spiritual intensity throughout my life. I have seen God do amazing, even miraculous things both here at Colonial and on the mission field. I have lived through seasons when everything was on the line, when I was living by faith at a level I didn't even know was possible, and those are seasons I will never forget. But predictably, when those seasons come to a close, there is always a season of spiritual and emotional let-down. I wish I could say that I've never found myself feeling sorry for myself under the figurative "broom tree," but I would be lying. The truth is, those seasons of let-down are more common in my faith journey than I want to admit.

In the season of let-down, we are very vulnerable to the Liar. Every threat is magnified; every temptation seems reasonable; and the desire to "check out" is not uncommon. Those are times that I want to fire myself and go work a "normal" job where no one is counting on me to lead and set an example of faithfulness. In the season of let-down, one critical email or complaint from a staff person feels like a burden too great to carry.

I know my confession may disappoint some of you who think that pastors and leaders of the faith should not have such moments of weakness and despair, but I'm simply being honest...as is the witness of scripture. If you read the scriptures carefully, you will find almost no exception to this rule. From Abram, to Moses, to David, to John the Baptist, to the Apostle Paul, we find seasons of let-down following times of great spiritual faithfulness. The tendency is predictable, if not inevitable. Even Jesus walked away from the ministry for a season now and then, and it comforts me to think that He wrestled with the let-down syndrome following seasons of great spiritual intensity as we all do.

Thankfully, God is not unaware of this syndrome, and so we find God initiating care and encouragement to Abram at exactly the moment he needs it most. In 15:1 God comes to Abram in a vision with these words of encouragement, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."

These are the perfect words that Abram needs to hear. God promises His steadfast love and reminds Abram that no weapon fashioned against him will prosper because God is his shield. And God reminds him that the material bounty he has refused in faith pales in comparison to God's reward for Abram's faithful obedience.

Church, this is a message we should all take to heart in the season of spiritual let-down when the threats seem overwhelming and our spiritual battery is all but drained. God is our shield and our protector, and our reward is HIM! Our reward for living by faith is a relationship with the Living God, our Creator, our Redeemer and our Sustainer...and that is enough. We can rest in Him, even when we have nothing left in the tank.

There is a saying that I want you to consider, and you've likely heard it before: "You'll never know that Christ is all you need until Christ is all you have."

Abram is depleted, frightened, and discouraged. As we'll see in a minute, he is disillusioned that after all these years in Canaan, he still has no child and no heir. But here's what Abram has yet come to understand: he has the LORD, and the LORD is sufficient. F. B. Meyer speaks to this point with eloquence:

Our God, who is love, and love in its purest, divinest essence, has given us much, and promised us more. But still His best and greatest gift is His own dear self—our reward, our great reward, our exceeding great reward. Is God yours? For if you have Him, you have all love and life, all sweetness and tenderness, all that can satisfy the heart and delight the mind. To have God is to have all, though bereft of everything. To be destitute of God is to be bereft of everything, though you have all.¹

II. Asking in Faith

Though God is faithful to meet Abram and to minister to his fears even before Abram says a word, Abram is still concerned. Having heard the comforting promises of God, Abram honestly replies in vss. 2-3: "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir."

Most scholars assume it's been close to ten years since the LORD called Abram back in Ur. For ten years Abram and Sarai have been expecting the miracle child, and thus far there has been no pregnancy and no child.

So, Abram engages God with his questions, but he does so respectfully. Church, often when we go through painful seasons or endure difficult circumstances, we don't ask God questions to learn anything; instead, we demand answers with a sense of self-righteous indignation. We shake our fists at the heavens and say something like, "How could let something like this happen? How could you be so heartless? How can you remain silent in light of this injustice? Why don't you care?" We scold God as though we are in a position to judge God's behavior and motives.

Note, however, that Abram is not demanding anything from God. He is not arrogant, angry, or revealing any kind of entitlement. He is simply asking the questions that are on his heart. He is concerned that he is getting older. He was recently in a battle that could have taken his life, so he's thinking about what would have happened if he had died. He's concerned that if he died anytime soon, his estate would be passed down to his business manager since he has no children.

So, Abram respectfully asks these questions of God with the desire to learn. He refers to God as "Lord God." His tone is not accusatory, but he is honest and he is trying to understand God's purpose and timing.

¹ F. B. Meyer, *The Life of Abraham* (Lynnwood: Emerald Books, 1996), 75-76.

Church, it is not only good to bring your questions before God, it would be unfaithful not to! How many times do we run into challenging circumstances and then discuss our problem with everybody *except* God! Instead of praying first, we only pray when we have no one left to talk to. There is no question that God welcomes our questions. Our Father in heaven is not offended by our concerns and confusion. But there is a right way and a wrong way to approach God.

Abram is modeling a faithful, humble approach to questioning God. He has reasonable questions, and he feels welcome to share his heart and his concerns because he is asking *in* faith as opposed to demanding answers in faithlessness. Keep this exchange in mind the next time you are struggling and wish to express yourself to God. Ask your questions respectfully and in faith, and you'll find that God is very willing to answer your questions.

Note that God is not offended by Abram's questions whatsoever. God understands Abram's concerns, and even though God has already promised Abram that counting his descendants would be like counting the grains of sand, He is willing to reaffirm His promise and reveal more about how that promise will come to pass.

III. God's Promise of Assurance

In vss. 4-5 God responds, saying: "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."

Not only does God respond to Abram with patience and love, He also reveals a bit more about His plan. Abram will have a son of his own who shall one day be his heir! This is a remarkable, very specific promise that must have deeply moved the heart of Abram. It is an unbelievable promise given his age, and yet God has declared it to be so.

The first part of this conversation must have happened in Abram's tent there in Mamre. Perhaps Abram was lying on his mat, exhausted and worried. His attention was focused on himself, his age, his vulnerability, and his doubts. So, God leads Abram outside and tells him to look up!

There are not many places in the Kansas City metro that provide a good look at the heavens due to ambient light and polluted air. But perhaps you have stepped outside on a cold night in the mountains, or at sea, or someplace far outside the city, and you remember the sheer awe of the beholding the stars in all their glory! To behold the heavens is to immediately appreciate your appropriate smallness and the glory of God! God created the heavens and the earth. God numbered the stars and knows them each by name. The God of heaven is the one who makes promises and keeps promises, amen? Church, can you imagine this moment with Abram? As Abram lifts his eyes to heavens and the billions upon billions of stars come into view, God says, "Look to the heavens and tally up the number you see, if you can!" It's a beautiful moment with some God humor thrown in because we could never stand there long enough to count even the stars that could be seen on any given night. Maybe Abram makes an effort for a minute or

two, but he would soon get the point. The stars are seemingly infinite in number, and so God says, “Abram, so shall your offspring be.”

Do you see why this moment is so profound? God is asking Abram to trust the providence and power of the Creator, and to be less trusting of Abram’s best thinking. Abram’s best thinking can’t reason as to how he will even have one son at his old age, not to mention a countless number of descendants. But God isn’t asking Abram to solve that problem; He’s asking Abram to place his faith in the one who created the heavens—and when we look at the heavens, we understand that nothing is impossible with God.

Church, where are you looking this morning? Are you looking at your bank account? Are you looking at the empty chair at the table? Are you looking in the mirror? Are you looking for your family members, your therapist, or your best thinking to somehow solve the unsolvable problems in your life? Remember this story and hear the LORD calling you to step outside this evening and look up! Look up and gaze upon the heavens. Look up and call upon the Lord of heaven and earth, believing that He hears your heart, and He is attentive to your needs. As we have sung so many times,

O soul, are you weary and troubled?
No light in the darkness you see?
There’s light for a look at the Savior,
And life more abundant and free.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

OK, let’s finish now with our fourth and final subheading:

IV. Believing God

There are very few verses in the Bible that are as famous and as significant as Genesis 15:6. This moment under the stars, when God speaks into Abram’s questions and points him to the heavens with a promise of a son and countless descendants...this moment is a defining moment for Abram and for our entire concept of justification through faith. Paul will spend significant time pointing back to this moment in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. James will point back to this moment as well in James 2. So, what happens that is so significant?

Having heard God’s promise, we read in vs. 6 that: [Abram] believed the LORD, and he [the LORD] counted it to him [Abram] as righteousness.

Note what the text does not say. The text does not say that Abram believed *in* God. It doesn’t say that Abram believed some things to be true about God. The text doesn’t say that Abram generally agreed with a biblical worldview. It doesn’t say that Abram felt warm and fuzzy about God.

The text states in no uncertain terms, Abram “believed God.” God spoke, and Abram believed what God said. Now, to be fair, Abram still has some questions as we’ll see. Abram is still going to be impatient and he will make some poor decisions. In other words, Abram’s belief is not “superhuman” or in some way “perfect” as compared to our shoddy version of belief. That said, we have to be impressed that this man in his 80’s believes God when God promises a son given the seemingly impossible circumstances surrounding that promise.

Even more significant, is how God responds to the belief of Abram. The text states that “The Lord counted it to Abram as righteousness.”

Herein lies one of the great mysteries of our faith. Whereas we would assume that righteousness would be associated with obeying the law of God, God reckons the belief of Abram as righteousness. The law will not be given through Moses for another 430 years according the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3:17, so it is no small thing that God reckons Abram to be righteous according to his faith, not his works.

Paul writes in Romans 4:18-25: ¹⁸In hope Abram 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, ²⁵who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Church, I hope you can appreciate what Paul is saying. Under the covenant of law, only those under the law could hope to be counted as children of Abraham. But Paul’s argument is that God reckoned Abram righteous due to his faith long before the law was given, thus all who believe upon God in faith, believing that Jesus Christ died for their sins and rose for our justification, are those counted as children of Abraham and heirs to the promises of God.

So why did God give the law? Why are we so inclined to strive for righteousness through our works? Does the law count for anything? Paul addresses those questions at the end of Galatians 3:21-29:

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²²But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

²³Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

I hope you can appreciate that when we say we are saved by grace through faith, that theological statement hails all the way back to Genesis 15:6 when God saw the faith of Abram and reckoned it as righteousness.

Now, does Abram's faith in God's spoken word somehow cleanse Abram from all iniquity? No, it doesn't. There is only one means of atonement for our sin, and that comes through the death and resurrection of God's only Son. Abram will be saved through Jesus, just as will all people who stand before God as the redeemed. There is only one Lord and one Mediator between God and men, and that is Jesus.

So why is Abram reckoned righteous long before Jesus is crucified on a Roman cross? Abram could not have possibly known of Jesus, right?

Well, remember what Jesus said last week to the Jews in John 8:56, "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad."

Now, that's something to think about for more than a minute. Abraham saw the day of Jesus and he was glad.

I don't think I can explain that verse, but I'm humbled by it, nonetheless. We must remember that Jesus is not an afterthought. Jesus is not bound by his timely incarnation. Jesus was with God and Jesus was God in the beginning. In Him all things were created. So, it is very possible that in some way, on that starry night in Genesis 15, God revealed to Abram a glimpse of the glory to come. Perhaps the Holy Spirit helped Abram to grasp that through His descendants One would arise who would bless every family on earth, as God had promised in Genesis 12.

How that all went down so many years ago will remain hidden for a time, but here's what we know: Abraham is the Father of our faith because his faith in God was reckoned as righteousness, and so it is to this day that we are saved by God's unmerited grace through faith in the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

The scriptures are redundant that our inequities were laid upon Christ so that His righteousness might be imputed to us, and that imputation of righteousness comes through faith, not by works. Again, F.B. Meyer says this better than I can:

Some teach imputed righteousness as it were something apart from Christ, flung over the rags of the sinner. But it is truer and better to consider it as a matter of blessed identification with Him through faith, so that as He was one with us in being made sin, we are one with Him in being made the righteousness of God. In the counsels of eternity, that which is true of the glorious Lord is accounted also true of us who, by a living faith, have become members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. Jesus Christ is made unto us righteousness, and we are accepted in the Beloved. There is nothing in faith, considered in itself, that can account for this marvelous fact of imputation. Faith is only the link of union, but inasmuch as it unites us to the Son of God, it brings us into the enjoyment of all that He is as the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last.²

Church, the imputed righteousness of Christ is a mystery that we will never grasp if we refuse to believe God. Listen: it is no more difficult to comprehend having a son at the age of 100 than it is to believe in God's unmerited mercy for a sinner like me. Everything in my flesh accuses me of failing to honor God's law. I deserve Hell on my best day. I know what I deserve. When I stare at the mirror, or I compare myself with others, or I look at all the people I've hurt and all the ways I've failed the ones I love, my fate feels as hopeless as Abram's prospect of an heir.

² Meyer, 79.

But when I look up...when I behold Jesus the Son of God on that cross, when I hear the promise of God that my sins will be separated from my account as far as the east is from west by the atonement of God's only Son, as hard as that is to comprehend and as impossible as it seems that I might be reckoned righteous, still I believe! I believe because God has made me alive when I was dead in my sin. I believe because Christ has risen, and the tomb is empty. I believe because I am persuaded by the deep, deep, love of Jesus for sinful souls like mine.

I believe, and like Abram...because of the blood of Christ, my belief will be reckoned by God as righteousness. I believe in Jesus, and I believe Jesus. By faith in the Risen Lord, I know that I am being made new and will one day stand before God as one who is forever cleansed of sin. That is what it means to be imputed with a righteousness that I did not earn and could never earn...that is what it means to be saved by grace through the blood of Jesus.

What do you believe? Who do you believe?

Church, believe God. Believe the Gospel, and be saved. Will you pray with me?