Genesis 12-15 July 22, 2018

*He Was in the Beginning, Part 6*

*(Abraham)*

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 In just 3 days, I will have been ordained as a pastor for 19 years! I can remember that day so well. It was a beautiful weather day, my small group hosted a brunch for me, and then mid-afternoon people started to gather to worship God together in my home congregation, Falling Spring Presbyterian. It was truly a day I looked forward to for years, and one I won’t ever forget. Have you had a day like that? A wedding day? A graduation day? The birth of a baby? The opening of a new business? The start of a dream vacation? The problem with all of these days, though, is that they come and then they go. Things might be different after that day, because of what happened on that day, but once midnight strikes, that day is over.

 Abraham, often described as the father of faith and the friend of God, had his heart set on a day out in the future based on promises made to him by God himself. In John 8, we find Jesus being asked by the people who prided themselves on being descendants of Abraham, *“Are you greater than our father Abraham?” Jesus replied, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad!”* John 8:53, 56

 How could Abraham see Jesus’ day – thousands of years in the future? In what way did he ‘see’ it? And why did it make him glad?

 Let’s look at Genesis 12:1-3 to begin. Listen for a command from God and for the promises from God, *“Now the Lord saidto Abram, “Go from your countryand your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.****2****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.****3****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.”*

 The command? Go from where you are to an unknown place. Go from your family to a new place. And Abraham did it. He obeyed what God told him to do, and when Abraham reached Canaan, God confirmed that he was where he was supposed to be. In v. 7 we read, *“To your offspring I will give this land.”* So, there was a general promise of blessing (I will bless you…) and now there is a tangible pledge – *the land you’ve now come to is going to belong to your children and your children’s children.*

 In Genesis 13:14-15, God expands upon his earlier promise to Abraham, *“Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever.”* This land, as far as your eyes can see, will belong to your family forever! And then he said (13:16), *“I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.”* But there was a problem. Abraham, at 75 years old, didn’t have any children.

Think about something that you would consider impossible for you to do. 1. Build a house from scratch, with no help from anyone. 2. Write a full musical score for a movie including all of the instrumental parts and words to the songs, and then gather all the musicians together to learn, play, and record it. 3. Perform a heart transplant. As impossible as any of those things might sound to us, that is how impossible what God was saying to Abraham sounded to him! He recognized that he was powerless to bring forth what God had promised. Powerless. He had nothing in his hand to bring to make this happen. If it was going to happen as God said, God was going to have to do it. It had to be ALL God. All God. All GOD. In Genesis 15:5 God repeats and clarifies his promise, *“And God brought Abraham outside and said, “Look toward the heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”*

 Before God spoke to him, Abraham had no longing in his heart for land and children. Maybe he had those longings inside of him 40 or 50 years before, but at 75 years old, those longings were long gone. But now, everything was different. Now, Abraham was living by faith in the promises of God. 1. God has promised to give him a son and that through that son the number of his descendants would be beyond counting. 2. God promised to make Abraham into a great nation, and that Abraham would be the father of many nations. 3. God promised to make Abraham’s name great and that he would be a blessing, and that in fact, all the families of the earth would be blessed or cursed through him based on their response to his offspring.

4. And God promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham’s offspring forever. Are you with me? Can you see the man’s life before the promise and the man’s life after the promise? Can you feel the new longing rising, a surprising longing rising within him because of what God had promised him?

 Look with me at Hebrews 11:12,13. This is a good news/bad news couple of verses. *“****12****Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.* ***13****These all died in faith, not having received the things promised.”* What? Abraham had descendants, but no one lived to receive what God promised? No possession of the land? That’s right. Abraham made his home in the promised land of Canaan, but Hebrews 11:9 tells us he did it *“as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs of the same promise.”* The only land Abraham ever owned in Canaan was a cave in which he buried his wife Sarah. And even though the children of Israel took possession of the land under Joshua’s leadership, it was constantly under attack and repeatedly invaded and overtaken by enemies. Just read the rest of the book…. One battle after another.

 This is why, folks, Abraham rejoiced to see Jesus’ day! He was given the faith to understand that while he and his descendants would enjoy tastes and glimpses of what God had promised to them, the land, and the descendants, and the blessings were given as tangible, material pointers toward a greater fulfillment to come! He understood that he wasn’t “the story,” he was just part of “The Story.” By faith, Abraham understood that everything God promised to him would ultimately be fulfilled through the one we read about in Genesis 3, the one still awaited, the promised offspring, Jesus Christ! Paul declared in 2 Corinthians 1:20, *“All the promises of God find their Yes in him!”*

1. Jesus is the offspring promised to Abraham that the birth of Isaac pointed toward. Galatians 3:29, “*If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”*
2. Jesus is the head of a great nation made up of disciples “of all nations.” John 11:52 tells us that Jesus died *“to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.”* The nation of believers! Not a geographical nation – a kingdom nation!
3. Jesus is the “King of the nations” revealed in Revelation 15:3, *“Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!”* Through him, all the families of the earth are eternally blessed or eternally cursed based on their response to him.
4. Jesus is the one who has gone ahead to prepare a place for us, a homeland, a better country, a promised land, a heavenly home. Hebrews 11:16, *“They were longing for a better country, a heavenly one.”*

Jesus is the ultimate offspring of Abraham. Read the beginning of *Matthew*! Jesus is the one through whom all the families on the earth will be blessed. Those who find life in him will be as numerous as the stars in the sky – beyond counting! How is it that Abraham’s name remains great? It is because of his connection to Christ – he who saw beyond what his eyes could see to the day of Christ – and was glad! Genesis 15:6 tells us that Abraham believed the LORD, and it was counted to him as righteousness. Abraham believed that what God said he would do, he would do. And God’s promise became part of Abraham. It wasn’t just some intellectual assent. Abraham’s belief in the promise that God gave to him changed him from the inside out – from the inside out. Abraham was ALL in, because he allowed God’s promises to get inside of ALL of him – body, mind, and spirit – and there was no going back!

I want to put forth two more Scriptures for us from the New Testament about all of this – because my words fall short. Let’s let God’s Word speak to us.

Romans 4:18-22, *“****18****In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.”****19****He 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 barrennessof Sarah's womb.****20****No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,****21****fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.****22****That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”*

Galatians 3:16, *“****16****Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.”*

Abraham didn’t know the name of the offspring or when he would come, but he looked forward in faith, understanding that the offspring promised to Adam and Eve would be one of his own descendants. And to his spiritual account, was deposited the gift of righteousness! Righteousness is the state of being guilt-free, even though you might be guilty, you are declared guilt-free. This gift of righteousness, of being declared guilt-free is something that God gives to us, not something that he requires of us. It is required, yes. It is essential, yes. But it is not provided by us, it is given to us by God himself. That’s why it’s called a gift.

 Without it, we will not get to the land God has promised as an inheritance for his children. Without the gift of righteousness we cannot enter the heavenly home, because the gift of righteousness is what covers our sin and makes us perfectly acceptable to a holy God. By faith Abraham believed God, and his spiritual account was credited with the gift of righteousness.

There’s only one way to receive the gift of righteousness. Abraham shows us. It is by placing our faith fully in the promised offspring - Jesus Christ – and what he came to do for us. But listen, please. What we need is faith that saves, not just words of faith “Oh yes, I believe in God,” NO! Faith that SAVES is not simply faith that believes in God or even tries hard to obey God’s commands. The righteousness of Jesus Christ is not credited to those who are trying to be spiritual or sincere about being religious. If that’s why you are here, well, I’m glad you here, but you need MORE. You need MORE. Saving faith, folks, that results in the gift of righteousness being given to us, is putting all our hope in what God has promised – and remember again that verse from 2 Corinthians 1:20, “*“All the promises of God find their Yes in him!”* Saving faith that imputes to us the gift of righteousness puts all our hope in the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and imminent return of the King of the nations – Jesus Christ!

Okay, now it’s going to get a little more complicated. But it’s worth the attention. Are you ready? Abraham believed. He had a saving faith, yes. But he doubted. Isn’t that comforting? It is, because we doubt too. But my guess is that Abraham didn’t doubt God’s promises as much as he doubted himself, knowing his own failings and frailties. He doubted whether he could really be God’s man. So, in knowing Abraham’s doubts, God did the following found in Genesis 15, *“****9****He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”****10****And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half.****11****And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.* ***12****As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him.”*

It was a common custom in Abraham’s homeland that the way two parties confirmed a promise or covenant was by killing an animal and dividing it in two. Then the two covenanting parties would walk in the blood between the divided animal, essentially saying, “May this be done to me if I don’t live up to my part of this promise, this covenant.” So, God put Abraham in a deep sleep (like he put on Adam when he formed Eve from his rib). But how could Abraham do his part and walk between the animal parts if he was in a deep sleep, confirming the covenant with God? He couldn’t. So we’re back to the ALL God theme. God knew that Abraham could not ever walk blameless before him. God knew that Abraham could not fulfill his part of the covenant, meaning “our part” of the covenant. God knew we would fail over and over again to live up to God’s standards, so Abraham wasn’t even invited to walk the bloody path. Here’s what happened, and as you read this think “burning bush,” think “pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night,” think “Mt. Sinai.“ ***17****When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.****18****On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I givethis land…”*

God alone made the promise, God alone walked the bloody path, God alone submitted himself to the curse, God alone assumed the full responsibility for seeing that every promise of the covenant would be realized and fulfilled in Jesus Christ the Lord! Galatians 3:13 declares, *“When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing*,” delivering us from the curse of our inability to live up to the covenant. Why? So that we might become heirs of its blessings. At the cross, the curse agreement of the covenant made with Abraham was exhausted, or fulfilled, on Christ! This is why Abraham rejoiced to see Jesus’ Day! Abraham rejoiced in something he only saw in shadows on that dark night! And it was credited to his spiritual account as righteousness.

 Abraham was just a regular hard-working man – a shepherd – and he believed the promises of God. Do you believe the promises of God? Even (and especially) when times are hard, when things aren’t going the way you want them to go, when we hear the news of families losing their loved ones to a horrific death at work, when the cancer has spread, when your marriage is falling apart, when the bank account is at zero, when the rejection letters keep coming…. Do you still believe the promises of God? Is it all the way inside of you, your belief, your faith, all the way in the very depth of your soul, that nothing, no hardship can separate you from him? So deep and so much a part of you that no matter what, you are walking out your faith, living it out, submitting, sacrificing, giving, loving, testifying because your true hope is not in the here and now (and all the stuff around us), your true hope is in what is yet unseen. Your true hope is in the great city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God! (Hebrews 11:10). Are you looking forward to that long-awaited day when all the true descendants of Abraham will be standing on a redeemed and renewed earth, when every part of it, beyond what our eyes can see, will belong to us forever? When you stop and think about what you really, really want, what you are longing for deep in your soul – not the temporal things - not the promotion, not the new car, not the completed home project, not the news you want to hear from the doctor or the lawyer or the admissions office, not the political victory you think should come, not anything here on earth – when you stop and think about what you really, really want – and you discover that more than anything you just want Jesus and his Kingdom to come, and you want your family, your descendants to long for him as you do, I have no doubt that the gift of righteousness has been credited to your account.

 By the grace of God, Abraham saw it. He saw the Day of Jesus Christ, and he was glad, even though he saw no fulfillment in the immediate here and now. This is where the rubber really meets the road for people, folks. This is where some turn away, because this is where it is revealed whether you want a relationship with God because of something he can do for you, or whether you just want a relationship with God because he wants a relationship with you.

Listen friends, the rest of today and tomorrow is not promised to us. We do not know when our last day on earth will come. All of us really are just passing through. But for those who have fully put their faith in Jesus Christ, for whom the gift of righteousness has been given and received, our last day here is only the beginning of the New Day that will last forever. If you’ve been delaying, if you’ve been holding off putting your faith fully in the promises of God, I believe God is calling to you today. He is ready to credit the gift of righteousness to your account, declaring you not-guilty – not because of any goodness you possess – but because of the curse that was satisfied on your behalf by Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. It is finished, folks. All you have to do is, by faith, believe.

*Heavenly Father, I pray for anyone hearing or reading this message today, that if they have been holding back, if they have not fully put their faith in your promises that find their YES in Jesus Christ, I pray that all defenses would be dropped, hearts would be softened, eyes would be opened, and hands would be extended to receive, to receive, to receive even NOW the gift of righteousness. What a hero of the faith Abraham is to have believed something so far beyond his sight! What a gift we have to live on this side of the cross and the resurrection! Help us to live for you. Help us to point to you in all that we do. Help us to remain unshaken by the wiles of the world as we steady our feet once and for all time on the foundation of faith in Jesus Christ the Lord, through whom we pray, Amen.*