

Abraham: The Covenant

Genesis 15:1-21

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How can we be righteous before God? That is a question that is on everyone's mind when they think about God. Even secular people when they talk about God give evidence that they are deeply concerned about this question: How can I be righteous before God?

The most popular way to answer this question is by making comparisons. Most people believe that they can become righteous before God by comparing themselves to other human beings. In school, we called this grading on a curve. The highest score on a test was considered an 'A' and the lowest score was considered an 'E'. So I all I needed to do in class to get an 'A' was to outperform my fellow students. This is rather like the man and his friend who encountered an angry bear in the woods. He turned to his friend and said "run". His friend replied, "You don't seriously think you can outrun a bear do you?" "No," said the man, "I only need to outrun you."

Most people comfort themselves by saying something like this: "I don't drink and drive; I don't cheat on my spouse; and at least I remembered to vote in the last election." This puts me head and shoulders above a lot of people in this town; therefore I am righteous before God. I'm glad I'm not like those other people I know who are in and out of jail, can't hold a job, don't care for their children and didn't stay in school. In this way they credit themselves with righteousness.

In baseball if you bat .300 you are considered a superstar, worthy of multi-year, multi-million dollar contract even though you are only successful 30% of the time! But in life and in morals, God doesn't care about a 30% success rate. Try telling that to the IRS when you're audited, "But sir, I'm 30% effective in paying what I owe!" Or try telling your spouse, "Honey, I'm 30% effective at being faithful to you." Likewise on judgment day you won't be able to say to God, "But Lord, I loved my neighbor 30% of the time." You cannot credit yourself with righteousness by comparisons to others; it's just a delusion.

The most important verse in the story of Abraham is Genesis 15:6 "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." The consistent teaching of the Bible is that we are made righteous with God on the basis of faith alone. It's not by comparisons, not by

works of charity, not by being active in church, it is by faith alone. Jesus made faith the only requirement to enter the Kingdom of God: “Repent and believe in the Good News,” he said

Faith requires an object. You don’t just have faith in general. You have faith in something or someone. The object of Abraham’s faith was the word of God. In Genesis 15:1, “The word of the LORD came to Abram...” Two thousand years later the word of God became flesh in Jesus Christ and called us to believe and follow him. In order for faith to exist, it has to have an object and the object for us is Jesus Christ the word of God made flesh. Christian faith shares the same object as Abraham’s faith 2,000 years before the first Christmas.

The tension between faith and doubt runs right through the middle of this chapter. Abraham reminds me of the man who said to Jesus, “Lord, I believe but help me with my unbelief.” Truth be told, there is unbelief in each one of us. Abraham keeps expressing his doubts, “Lord what will you give me...Lord, how can I know...” (Genesis 15:2, 8) God is not shocked or offended by Abraham’s doubts. God seeks to reassure Abraham. The message here is for us to take our doubts directly to God. We don’t have to be afraid or embarrassed. In fact, its clear God wants to help us with our doubts. It’s really too bad that at the time of greatest doubt: after a tragic death or divorce, some people use their doubts as an excuse to turn away from God exactly at the time when He most desires to help them. God is the mender of broken hearts but we have to be able to give him all the pieces, especially including our doubts.

God gives something to Abraham to assuage his doubts: “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram...” (Genesis 15:18) This is the first appearance of that most important word in the story of Abraham. What is a covenant? It is like a legal contract that two parties enter into, each with certain obligations, except this covenant is rather one-sided: God initiates it and God alone is the responsible party. All that is required of Abraham at this point is to believe.

Scholars tell us the actual ceremony of cutting the animals in two and walking between them is based on an ancient cultural tradition the symbolic meaning of which has been lost. It is like a handshake—no one really knows the original symbolic meaning, but we all accept it as a sign of trust and good will between two people. For those of you who like Bible trivia, this passage is where we get the modern expression, “Let’s cut a deal together.”

The message here is not that you need to cut up farm animals in your backyard every time you have doubts about God. The point here is that God has bound himself to you in a solemn and eternal covenant. He did this for Abraham and He did this for Christians. When Jesus died, he

said his blood was to seal the new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. So when we have doubts as to whether or not God exists; when we doubt whether or not God really cares; we are to look to the Cross of Christ. The Cross is the solemn demonstration of God's covenant to love us and deliver us from sin and death. The cross is a historical fact and it testifies to the covenant that God has made to save the world. It is our great reassurance. We need to do nothing except to believe and bring the cross to bear upon our doubts.

God tells Abraham about 400 years of future history that he will never see—a good portion of it involves the slavery of his descendants finally ending in his descendants claiming the Promised Land. Why does God tell him this? It is because the meaning of life is much larger than the confines of one man's life span. To truly understand the meaning of life you must employ faith...the kind of faith that lifts you beyond the narrow confines of your own life span...the kind of faith that locates you as a small piece of a larger drama that God is playing out in human history.

If I gave you a novel today and asked you to read only one chapter in the middle, you wouldn't be able to tell me what the story was about or even who the good guys or bad guys are. The only way to judge the meaning of life is to know the whole story from beginning to end. That is what is so special about the Bible. It is the only book written to tell the whole story of the universe from its origin to its destiny. There is no other book on earth like it. If you want to know the meaning of your life, you will never get it just by looking at your own experience. By faith you need to put yourself into the larger story. The larger story is this God is at work to save the world through Jesus Christ and history is driving to a final moment when we will all stand before him in judgment and he will renew the heavens and the earth. We can count on this because we have a covenant with God demonstrated on the cross.