

Made right before God

Genesis 15

Covenant Waterfall, 13 February 2022

Read

Pray

Introduction

I'm sure you've had similar experiences to me when chatting to friends and family about God, the gospel or coming to church. Their response is usually something to the effect of, "I'm a good person" which is another way of them saying, "I've done enough for God to accept me – I live a decent, moral life, obey all the rules, don't harm anyone else, so of course God accepts me just as I am."

And if we're honest with ourselves, perhaps we too have this tendency to self-justify, for self-righteousness. Think – "Well, I may not be perfect, but at least I'm not as bad as those folks out there, at least I go to church, pray, read the Bible, try to obey God, try to love others..." It's easy to fall into a default setting of works-righteousness, in other words, doing things for God in order for his to love us.

This morning we're in Genesis 15, and we're going to look at the covenant that God made with Abram, and how Abram was made right before God. What we'll see is that this was not because of his own behaviour, but purely because of his faith alone that God counted him as righteous – that God justified him.

- Abram's justification
- God's covenant with Abram
- How this all reveals Christ

A. Abram's justification, vv.1-6

Let's remind ourselves of the context of this passage – already God has promised Abram three times in the previous chapters that despite him and his wife's old age and her barrenness, he will be the father of multitude of descendants, and that they will inherit a Promised Land. As yet, none of those promises have been fulfilled – Abram and Sarai remain childless, and while they are currently living in the Promised Land, it is still occupied by the Canaanites. Last week, Genesis 14, Abram is blessed by this mysterious Priest-King Melchizedek after being successful in battle, and now our passage continues after that in Genesis 15.

Verse 1 - **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."**

God appears before Abram in a vision and confirms what Abram has experienced in battle. God has indeed been his shield – God enabled Abram to defeat the enemy kings – armies of king Chedorlaomer, and now God tells him that his reward will be "very great." Abram replies to God in the following verses:

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."

What reward are you talking about Lord?! Abram is still childless! God has already promised him children, but nothing so far! Instead of having a son of his own, his heir will have to be a distant relative – Eliezer of Damascus.

God then replies to Abram in verses 4-5 and says:

"This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." ⁵ And he brought him outside and said, "Look towards heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

No – Eliezer of Damascus will not be Abram's heir. Instead, God re-iterates his promise to Abram, that he will provide a son, **"your very own son shall be your heir"**. The Hebrew is much more vivid – says literally, "from out of your own loins will come your heir". Message is clear – your heir will be your own flesh and blood!

Then God brings him outside, underneath the night sky to see the innumerable stars – that’s how many offspring will be. What then is Abram’s response? Verse 6:

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

What happens here? This is a pivotal moment in the story of redemption – Abram is made right before God. How so? Despite it being humanly impossible for Sarai and him to have a child, let alone millions of descendants – they are both around 100 years old and Sarai is barren – Abram against all odds believes God’s promise to him. Result? God counts righteousness to Abram. Abram is made right with God.

What does this mean? Not that Abram is now righteous in himself, not that he is now sinless and perfect. How do we know this? We will see in the chapters that follow that despite Abram being declared as righteous before God, he still continues to act in unrighteous ways and still sins. So what does it mean then that Abram is made right before God?

It means that God counts, or imputes his own righteousness to Abram. Though Abram is still a sinner, God by his grace, clothes Abram with a righteousness that is not Abram’s own, but that belongs to God, so that Abram is made right with God. It’s nothing within Abram that makes him right with God – all a gift from God. Abram just receives this as a gift of grace through faith alone. In other words, Abram is *justified* before God through faith.

B. God’s Covenant with Abram, vv.7-21

Abram is now justified before God. Then God decides to make a covenant with Abram.

Verses 7-8:

And he said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.”⁸ But he said, “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?”

God has made this promise a few times already to Abram, but now Abram says to God essentially – when is this going to happen? How do I know that I will possess the land? So God makes a covenant with him. Verses 9-10 – we see this covenant making ceremony: God tells Abram to get a heifer (cow), goat and ram (all three years old), and a dove and a

pigeon. Kill them – cut them in half (except the birds) and make a space between the two halves of the animals.

Then in vv.12-14, God causes Abram to fall into a deep sleep, darkness falls upon him and God prophesies to him that his offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs. There they will be slaves for 400 years until God judges the nation that has enslaved them. God will deliver them out of that land, leave with great possessions. Prophecy about what will take place some hundreds of years later when Israel is in Egypt.

Verse 17-18 continue... **“When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking firepot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, ...”**

What is going on here? Bloodied animals cut in half? This was how covenants were made in ancient times between two parties. Cut animals in half, both parties walked between the slaughtered animals, which served as a vivid picture of what would happen to you if you broke the covenant – you’re going to end up like one of these dead animals! Penalty for breaking the covenant – cursed death. In fact in the Hebrew Bible, the idiom used for “to make a covenant” is literally “to cut a covenant” because cutting up animals was the way covenants were sealed.

But what is unusual here is that both parties of the covenant do not walk through the slaughtered animals. Only one does. Abram is sleeping. Verse 17 tells us that a smoking firepot and flaming torch passed between the pieces. These both symbolise God’s presence (Exodus 13 – God’s presence flaming pillar). Basically it is only God who passes through the animals – not Abram.

Why is this significant? The nature of God’s covenant with Abram is that it is unilateral – God promises to do everything – Abram doesn’t have to do anything. Just receives the covenant promises by faith. Therefore it’s a covenant of grace. Also, it is God alone who promises to take upon himself the covenant penalty. He promises to end up like the slaughtered animals, to carry the curse, if the covenant is broken.

C. How this all reveals Christ

Two ways Christ is revealed here – first in Abram’s justification. Second – God’s covenant with Abram. First way...

It’s commonly believed that the OT saints (like Abraham, Moses, David etc.) were made right with God in a different way than that of the NT saints, because Jesus had not yet come in the OT. Believed that in the OT – Jews had to obey the law in order to be saved, while NT – salvation is through faith in Christ.

What we see here in Genesis 15 is that this is simply not true. The Apostle Paul reflects on our passage in Romans 4 and explains why... vv.1-5:

“What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness...”

Clear here that Abraham was not made right with God on the basis of his works – he didn’t earn his salvation. In actual fact, as we’ve seen and will see – he acted in ungodly and sinful ways. So how then did he get right with God? As we saw in Genesis 15:6, **“he believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.”**

Paul sums this up in this way – if you work for something, you earn it yourself, you don’t receive it as a gift. Heart of every religion, philosophy, sinful heart – work your way up to God. The gospel is not at all like this. It’s the complete opposite – **“to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly – his faith is counted as righteous.”**

Gospel = don’t work your way up to God, actually that’s impossible – can only just believe in the God who justifies the ungodly – like Abraham did, and receive his righteousness counted to us as a gift of grace.

Therefore, Abraham (and all the OT saints), just like we who have received Christ, are made right with God, justified, in exactly the same way – through grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone.

Second way... God's covenant with Abram. This covenant is a part of a much greater covenant of grace that stretches across the Scriptures – how God relates to his chosen people. See all of Abram's descendants – nation of Israel, new Israel – the church, continually break this covenant by going after other gods, by sinning and rebelling against God. Result – should endure the penalty for breaking the covenant. Penalty? Saw in Genesis 15 – deserve to be slaughtered to death like those animals. But because only God passed through the dead animals, he alone promises to bear the curse instead of us, for breaking the covenant.

This is why Galatians 3:13-14 declares:

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”

In Christ, God is faithful to his promise to bear the curse for the broken covenant. How? He himself bears the curse for us, by being slaughtered on the cross. His body is broken, his blood is shed, in our place.

Conclusion

If even one of the greatest men of faith in the Bible, Abraham, is called “ungodly” in Romans 4:5, just imagine, before our holy God, how ungodly we are. Romans 3:23 – all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Our tendencies for self-righteousness, to self-justify, to even think that work our own way to God, all reveal just how much sin is within us and deceives us. Therefore, all covenant-breakers and so deserve to face the penalty which is death.

Leave us in despair? That's the point. It's impossible for any of us to make ourselves right before God. That's precisely why Romans 4:5 says that, **“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.”**

It's only God who can make us right with himself. How does he do this? Because Jesus has taken upon himself the covenant curse meant for us, because of our sins, by dying on the cross for us; he freely forgives us our sins. He pays off our debt. Not only does he pay our

debt, but like with Abraham, he credits to us his own perfect righteousness – the very righteousness of Christ, so that we can stand before him, perfect, cleansed of our sins, having peace with God, called his own sons and sealed by his Spirit with the promise of eternal life in him.

Repent and receive this gift of grace through Christ by faith, so we can join with the Apostle Paul in affirming (Romans 5:1-2):

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”

Amen