

God's Promised Reward

Genesis 15:1-6

The greatest question that can ever be asked is this, "How can a man be made right with God?" That is the most important issue facing every single human being who has ever lived or who will ever live. It is the deepest spiritual struggle that confronts every one of you and every single person whom you meet. Answering that question is the ultimate purpose of God's revelation recorded in the Bible. This is the ultimate question. How can a sinful man be made right with God?

The world offers a number of answers to the question. Perhaps the dominant response provided by the world is to deny the validity of the question altogether. The world, after all, would say that man is not sinful. Or that God is not wrathful. And either way the need for man to be made right with God is eliminated, because there is no barrier to be overcome. By nature, man is already right with God, the world around us declares.

The trouble is, deep down, no one really believes that. Deep down, every person knows he's a sinner. He knows that in some way, he has failed God, and if he tries to deny it, the suppression of that reality will, without fail, cause incredible psychological damage. The proposed solution offered by the world to that psychological dilemma is worthless--the solution offered for a guilty conscience is the empty, advice which consists mainly of the encouragement to learn how to love yourself.

That advice doesn't help a guilty conscience. Trying to love yourself doesn't remove guilt. Trying to deny that there is a sin-barrier between God and man doesn't work.

Others, often found in organized religion, will offer a somewhat

different answer to the question, that is, that a man is made right with God on the basis of his performance. Live a certain way, do certain things, and God will accept you. This is the popular belief of all religions other than true Christianity, and unfortunately it finds its way into much Christian thinking and even Christian preaching. Oh, what a deadly error, for once you think that you must perform in order to achieve God's favor, you are under a terrible, terrible curse, and under unescapable self-condemnation. For if you really understand your own sins, you will never be able to perform adequately to atone for your own sins.

Others, in total despair of being made right with God, believe they will never find the answer. And such hopelessness often leads to suicide, for a person who has no hope of being made right with God often finds no reason to live.

However, the correct answer to that question of how a man is made right before God is before us this morning in as clear and simple an example as you will find anywhere in Scripture. The answer is found through the example of Abraham. And if you don't understand the passage that's before us today, then it's my fault, because this text is so plain, so straightforward.

We have here first a great promise from God. Then Abraham's question borne of his own confusion. Then God's marvelous answer. And finally, Abraham's response, which is, quite simply, to believe God. As we study those four things, make sure that you are prepared to be as simple-minded as Abraham, and prepared to believe whatever God says. We'll begin with the promise.

I. GOD'S PROMISE: A PROMISE OF REWARD.

v.1

Let me emphasize first that this is “the word of the Lord.” This is the first time we find that expression used in the Bible, and our attention should be immediately drawn to the speaker. This is GOD’S revelation, God’s own explanation of himself. It came in a vision, that is, in a form of direct revelation. Not an unconscious dream, but a visual, clearly identifiable communication which caused Abraham to know for sure that God was speaking to him.

The promise was of reward, a very great reward. Interestingly, the Hebrew word “reward” is usually translated wages, and is properly termed “reward” here because there is no sense that God is paying Abraham just wages for performance rendered. This is not a job, but a calling. Yet Abraham will be blessed, as he follows God.

God will be his reward, and the ultimate fulfillment of that reward is eternal salvation. Abraham understood that, for Hebrews 11 says explicitly that he was looking for heavenly rewards, not merely a place to live on earth. We read in,

Hebr. 11:8 “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”

God is our very great reward, and that is the basis of our faith. God is real, God is true, God is sovereign. God saves and God condemns. So the ultimate reward which anyone can receive, namely eternal life, is a reward from God, a gift of his grace. Notice how God explains this great promised reward.

v.1

First,

A. God’s promise removes fear.

Now, what was Abraham afraid of? If we tie this with what we just read in chapter 14, we could think that he might be afraid of additional military expeditions and confederations of nations. He might be afraid of a military takeover.

But there was a much greater fear that must have gripped Abraham, a fear revealed by his subsequent question, the fear that he would remain childless. Abraham had no children, though God had already explained his covenant promise to him.

Gen. 13:14 “And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him: “Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are—northward, southward, eastward, and westward; 15 for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever. 16 And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered. 17 Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you.”

The fear was that Abraham would have no offspring to inherit the land. The fear was that this promise from God wouldn’t be fulfilled. The fear, based upon human capabilities, was that he would go to his grave with no natural born children. But God’s promise removes fear. God says to Abraham, and he says to us, “Do not fear.”

This is so important for understanding your own soul, and your own emotions. Fear comes when we lose our focus on God. Fear comes when we forget God’s promises, or neglect to meditate upon them. That’s true for every one of you, and each one of you could probably identify a situation in your own life demonstrating that very point. Ultimately, fear comes when love

grows just a little bit cold. For we read in,

1 John 4:16 “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. 19 We love Him because He first loved us.”

Dear friends, love God. In love, believe his promises, and you will discover that love really does drive out fear. Love, built upon the promises of God, removes fear. And God says to us repeatedly in Scripture, “Do not fear.” Just one example,

Isa. 41:8 “But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, The descendants of Abraham My friend. 9 You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, And called from its farthest regions, And said to you, ‘You are My servant, I have chosen you and have not cast you away: 10 Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.’ 11 “Behold, all those who were incensed against you Shall be ashamed and disgraced; They shall be as nothing, And those who strive with you shall perish. 12 You shall seek them and not find them—Those who contended with you. Those who war against you Shall be as nothing, As a nonexistent thing. 13 For I, the LORD your God, will hold your right hand, Saying to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you.’ 14 “Fear not, you worm Jacob, You men of Israel! I will help you,” says the LORD And your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.”

Secondly,

B. God’s promise provides protection.

v.1 “I am your shield”

These things are related, for often we fear when we doubt our protection. We fear when we are vulnerable, or at risk. We fear when we question whether or not we can defend ourselves. God says, “I will defend you. I will protect you. Do not fear.” Such is God’s very great reward.

Let me interject a NT explanation, one which is very consistent with this promise from God. In writing to the Ephesian church, Paul speaks about a shield of protection. And in describing the armor of God in Ephesians 6, he calls it the “shield of faith.”

Eph. 6:16 “:...above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one.”

So God will protect you! Just as he promised Abraham. That protection comes through the exercise of faith. Thus, protection that removes fear is the reward which God promises.

v.1

Then Abraham responded with a very specific question, one which revealed much more faith than doubt, for the question was based upon the word which God had spoken to him, a word Abraham expected to be fulfilled, but one which apparently confused him. So, in that confusion, we read the question.

II. ABRAHAM’S QUESTION: A QUESTION OF CONFUSION.

v.2-3

This, too, is an easy concept to understand. In that society, household servants were honored and respected, and the highest of the servants would actually be placed in the line of inheritance. If there were no children, the household servants would stand to inherit the estate.

Abraham had no children, just the servant Eliezer of Damascus. In his question before God, again a question that does not deny his faith,

A. Abraham recognized his own weakness.

His own body was weak. He would not believe that God was weak, but he surely was. He was unable to have a child. And in that weakness, wonder how God can give him uncountable descendants. After all, in an obvious point, uncountable descendants have to start with one child.

Abraham's confusion is understandable, and keep in mind, I'm choosing the word confusion instead of the word doubt, for I think that better expresses what this whole context describes. Abraham just didn't understand. His weakness, his physical inability, seemed to contradict what God had promised. And in his confusion,

B. Abraham recognized only a natural solution.

v.2b-3

The only solution Abraham can imagine is one of purely natural means, yet that seems to deny the force of what God has promised.

Again, without labelling this a lack of faith or even doubt, let us be warned against the same danger--the danger of looking for natural solutions when supernatural means are called for. That really was Abraham's shortcoming in asking the question, simply the inability to consider God's supernatural power.

I suspect that you can recognize times in your own life when you fall into the same pattern, falling to the temptation to restrict your thinking to natural consequences. So let me assure you that

God is powerful. All-powerful. Omnipotent. And the God who created the world in the space of six days, the God who brought the universal flood but saved Noah and his family, the God who sent his own son into the world to be born of a virgin and later raised from the dead, that God can do all things.

When you are confronted with a problem, when you face a dilemma, a struggle, a crisis, don't limit your thinking to what you can see with your eyes or touch with your hands. Don't look for merely natural solution. Instead, as Abraham did when he received God's answer, trust in God's supernatural power and in his perfect faithfulness. Whatever God has promised, he will fulfill. Whatever he says he will do, he will do. No matter what you may see with your own eyes.

God answers Abraham, and the answer itself proves that Abraham's question was not a denial of his faith. The answer shows that the question was legitimate, for,

III. GOD'S ANSWER IS AN ANSWER OF HOPE.

v.4-5

Hope is what keeps us alive sometimes. Hope is what keeps us going. Hope is expectantly waiting for something better. Abraham has such hope. It's a hope given to him by God's promise, and remember the definition of hope I so often explain--hope is the confident expectation that something will happen. Not wishful thinking, not uncertain optimism in the face of overwhelming odds.

Biblical hope is an absolute certainty. That which you hope for is that which you confidently believe that you will receive. For Abraham, that was simple. His hope was a child. A child of his own. Not Eliezer, his house servant. But a child promised by God.

A. God promises Abraham a biological child.

v.4

The word “body” means inward parts, sometimes even belly or bowels. Here, the word has rather obvious but gentle reference to the reproductive organs, and Abraham surely would have understood the significance. God is promising Abraham a biological child. He is promising that Abraham will father a child, to be born to his wife Sarah.

And there is nothing uncertain about God’s promise. Abraham could have absolute certainty, because it was God’s promise. And despite the response of doubtful laughs which we’ll study in chapter 18, he had that great hope. He would have a child. A son, coming from his own body. A biological son. And more.

B. God promises Abraham uncountable descendants.

This promise is repeated for us, for appropriate emphasis. Over and over again, we see the covenant promise focused on the seed of Abraham. And, of course, from the NT, we see clearly that we, the church of Jesus Christ, we are that seed. We are those descendants. We are the children of Abraham.

The promise is glorious, quite unimaginable even.

v.5

What a perfect illustration! God has already described the number of children of Abraham as dust on the earth. Now, perhaps even more personally, more strikingly, he describes them as stars in the sky. Stars are personal. Unlike the dust on the ground, you can look up and see each one. We read in the Bible that God appointed each one in its place, and calls each one by name.

But like the dust, like the grains of sand on the seashore, numbering them is impossible. The point is unmistakable. Abraham will have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky.

What a glorious promise. But one thing is still left. One crucial part of this text and this message. Abraham has to believe God’s promise. He has to accept it and receive it. He does.

IV. ABRAHAM’S RESPONSE: A RESPONSE OF FAITH.

v.6

Abraham believed God.

Many of us tend to live by the old adage, “I’ll believe it when I see it.” Many in the secular scientific community live by the principle, “I’ll believe it only when I can test it and prove it by experimentation in a laboratory.” Many of us act according to the adage of President Reagan in negotiating arms reduction treaties with the former Soviet Union a generation ago, “Trust, but verify.” In the business world or in commercial transactions, we believe an offer only when it is backed up with a deposit or downpayment.

Abraham required none of those things. He didn’t ask God for a deposit. He didn’t require verification. He didn’t seek to test God’s promise, nor wait for the physical evidence. He believed.

A. Abraham believed God’s promise with absolute certainty.

That’s what faith is.

To put this into our contemporary situation, Abraham believed God so much that he would begin getting the nursery ready. Maybe he would get his will undated. Maybe a college savings

account would be started. Abraham was going to be a father. He believed God's promise.

v.6a

It is common to identify the three different parts of true, genuine faith, each of which has a fancy Latin title given by theologians. The fancy names aren't important, but the ideas are. The first part of faith is understanding. Cognitive, intellectual, conscious understanding.

The second part is believing it to be true. But those two parts, in themselves, are inadequate. The classic example of that inadequacy is found in,

James 2:19 "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!"

Satan has those first two aspects of faith, when it comes to understanding God and knowing that God is true. But the third, absolutely essential part, is trust. Personal trust. Personal commitment. Personal surrender. Any of those words are appropriate.

I do not wish for you merely to understand the things which I explain from the Bible. I do not wish for you merely to understand and believe the things which I explain from the Bible. What I wish for, and what I pray for, is that the Holy Spirit would take that which I explain from the Bible, and cause you to lay hold of the truth so fully that it transforms your life! That it frees you from the guilt of your sin, and from the threat of condemnation.

That's what happened to Abraham. He believed. Abraham responded to God's promise with true, genuine, saving faith. Indeed,

B. Abraham was justified by faith.

v.6

The doctrine of justification by faith is the one doctrine, above all others, upon which the gospel of Jesus Christ hinges! Hear just how extreme I phrased that. I did it intentionally. This is the gospel. With the doctrine of justification by faith, the gospel is clearly defined. Without it, the gospel is lost.

What happened to Abraham, is that, by faith, by the act of believing and trusting in the truthfulness of what God promised, he was declared righteous. Righteousness was credited to him. "He accounted it to him for righteousness."

So, I go back to my introduction. How can a man be made right with God? Ultimately, only two answers are possible, and one of them is the wrong answer and one of them is the right answer.

How can a man be made right with God? The wrong answer? By his works. By his performance.

And why is that the wrong answer? Because you will never do enough. You never can do enough. You can never atone for your past sins, even if you never sin again! So, your righteousness, or right standing before God as the judge of heaven and earth, does not come, in any way whatsoever, through works.

And the correct answer? Righteousness, or right standing before God, is credited to you, imputed to you, reckoned to you, on the basis of what someone else has done in your place.

In other words, you are declared righteous, justified, because God the judge declares in his eternal courtroom that the

righteousness of Jesus Christ is credited into your account, and that the suffering and death of Jesus Christ satisfied the debt of justice and the demands of wrath and vengeance.

And what must you do to receive such a salvation? Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith.

Eph. 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

Even yet, faith isn’t your crowning achievement or even a work that you do at all. Faith is the humble readiness to accept a gift being freely offered to you by God’s promise. So let me read,

Gal. 3:8 “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham. 10 For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” 11 But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “the just shall live by faith.” 12 Yet the law is not of faith, but “the man who does them shall live by them.” 13 Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”), 14 that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.”

So as I end this morning, let me explain this gospel again, in the words of,

Rom. 3:19 “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be

stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. 20 Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. 21 But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness.”

I wish for you to understand these words, and I labor to explain them clearly for you. I wish for you to believe the truthfulness of what I say, and I exhort you with all the power which words in our language possess.

But most of all, I wish for something supernatural to take place in your hearts, and for this I must pray, for this is beyond any human ability to accomplish. I pray for you, that there would be in you a trust, a personal trust, so that you will believe with absolute certainty that you stand before the God of Heaven and Earth as a person justified by faith, a person who has been declared innocent and accepted before God because of what Jesus Christ accomplished for you on the cross.

May the Holy Spirit, through the Words of Scripture, give you that assurance. It is an assurance well stated in these words of the familiar hymn, “Not what my hands have done, can save my guilty soul. Not what my toiling flesh has borne can make my spirit whole. Not what I feel or do can give me peace with God. Not all my prayers and sighs and tears can bear my awful load.

Thy work alone, O Christ, can ease this weight of sin. Thy

blood alone, O Lamb of God, can give me peace within. Thy love to me, O God, not mine, O Lord, to thee, can rid me of this dark unrest, and set my spirit free.”

So believe in the Lord yourself, just as Abraham did. And that faith shall be credited to you, accounted to you for righteousness.