

“The Covenant (约) Is Established and Maintained by God’s Grace Alone”

Text: Genesis 15:1-6, 18-20; Romans 3:28--4:13, 22-25.

By Pastor Rand Lankheet, at New Horizon URC, First sermon, on March 25, 2018

Introduction: Maybe you have heard this explanation of the Old Testament as it relates to the New Testament. It comes with a clever rhyme (押韵 , 韵律) . “The New is in the Old contained; the Old is by the New explained.” [Repeat.

We have been looking at the man Abraham in the Book of Genesis. Among other things, we have been learning that Abraham points us directly to Jesus.

The good news of Jesus is displayed for us in the Old Testament.

But, never forget this: the New Testament explains for us the Old Testament. [Repeat.

We could say that the New Testament is God’s commentary (注释 , 解经) on the Old Testament.

So Romans chapter 4, in the NT, gives us understanding of Genesis chapter 15, in the OT.

In Romans 4, the apostle (使徒) Paul is contrasting a wrong way to view salvation, and a right way to view salvation. The wrong way, is to consider our salvation as something earned by us, or partly earned by us. By our trying hard to obey God.

The Jews of Paul’s day thought they would be saved by God if only they proved themselves. If only they performed the works of the law, the law given in the days of Moses.

And isn’t that how many, even most people, think of becoming a Christian today?

That they have to stop their bad habits. And they have to learn good habits.

If only unbelievers stop their swearing (咒骂) , or their drunkenness (醉酒) , or their lust (情欲) , then God will be moved to save them. So they think. But that is wrong.

Many evangelical (福音派的) Christians, even some of Reformed or Presbyterian (长老会) background, fall into this

error. That if unbelievers, or we ourselves, read their Bibles more, if only we pray more, if only we go to church more, then, God will have mercy on us. Yes, it is good to read our Bibles, and to pray, and to go to church. These things help us to learn, and to understand the things of God better. But none of those things contribute to our getting saved.

Did Abraham contribute to his salvation? Did his works, or his prayers, or his good habits, help make him righteous before God? [Romans 4:2-3. To be justified (被称为义) before God, means to be considered righteous, morally and spiritually good. Was Abraham justified by doing any good works? Did his good lifestyle make him morally and spiritually good before God? NO!

Oh, vs. 2, says, that if he wanted, Abraham could boast TO PEOPLE about some of the good things in his life. But Abraham could not boast TO GOD about anything good in his life. How was Abraham saved? How was he accounted righteous (被算为义) before God?

[Read Romans 4:3. Abraham is used by Paul, to prove his point in [Romans 3:28. Read.

Paul makes the same point in [Romans 4:5-6. Read. God “imputes (把...归于 , 算为) righteousness” to sinful people, to you and to me. Why? Simply because we “believe” God’s promise. In particular, we believe God’s promise to save us in Jesus. We are justified by faith alone (因信心得称为义) ; apart from any of our works. We are justified by simply trusting in Jesus.

Because only Jesus has absolute righteousness. Perfect goodness.

Only Jesus has obeyed God’s law fully, inwardly and outwardly.

In Genesis 15:6 we read that Abraham simply believed God. That is, he trusted in God’s promise. Contained in God’s promise, was the promise to someday send Jesus.

Abraham by faith was looking forward to the coming of Jesus.

So Abraham was saved in the same way we are saved today:

By faith alone, in Christ alone, with the righteousness of Christ credited to him.

Brother and sisters and friends, this is RADICAL (极端的) RELIGION. This is truly RADICAL religion.

You see, every religion in the world teaches that you must improve yourself, somehow, so that you can connect with God. As God is understood in those religions.

The religion of ISLAM has its Five Pillars (支柱) ...five things they must do so that Allah will take them to heaven someday. Such things as praying, praying at those five special times during the day; also they must practice fasting (禁食), and particularly during Ramadan. And so on.

The religion of BUDDHISM (佛教) has an eight-fold path, for self-fulfillment or freedom from any desire. That is their equivalent of heaven. The eight-fold path of Buddhism includes the requirement of right speech, right actions, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

And what about the religion of JUDAISM (犹太教) ? Judaism demands obeying the Torah (妥拉), the law of God. To be saved by Yahweh, the rabbis (拉比 , 教师) teach you must live according to their rules and regulations.

Even some who stand in the Christian tradition, have it wrong.

The ROMAN CATHOLICS, in the Middle Ages and some even today, say this: “for God to forgive you of your sin, you must do your penance (赎罪的苦行 , 苦修), including making verbal confession (忏悔) to a priest (神父).”

They tell you that to remain in a state of grace, you must say your ‘Hail Marys’ and ‘Our Fathers’ and take the Eucharist (圣餐). If you don’t, most priests give you no hope of salvation.

Even some evangelical Christians get it wrong.

Many of them will say that God saves you by grace alone, in Christ alone... but to STAY saved, they say, you must do your part. You must, for example, have your daily personal quiet time. You must, for example, witness to at least one unbeliever each week. You must be involved in this or that church meeting during the week. Many evangelicals imply this:

“yes, we START our journey of salvation by Christ alone,

but we STAY saved, only as we continue to do the right things.”

Again, many of these things are helpful in living our Christian life—for example, having personal devotions (灵修), witnessing (作见证) to unbelievers. And taking the Lord’s Supper (圣餐) and saying the Lord’s Prayer (主祷文) help to strengthen our faith. But to be saved, what does God require?

One of our hymns says it clearly. It says: “Nothing in my hands I bring.” NOTHING.

“Simply to thy cross I cling (紧紧抓住).” To Jesus, we cling. To Jesus, we hold on to.

Jesus alone, Jesus with His perfect righteousness, is our only hope of salvation.

So in Genesis 15, we find God again coming to Abraham. We first read of God coming to

Abraham in Genesis 12. Now God appears again. And, as before, God came freely, graciously. Nothing compelled Him to reveal Himself to Abraham. And, frankly, Abraham doesn’t show much faith. In fact, he is worried and fearful. He expresses his worry in vs. 2, “Lord, where is that child, that descendant (后裔), you promised me?”

God then makes a specific promise to Abraham: that through his wife, Sarah, he would someday have a son. A special heir. And by that special son, Abraham’s descendants would become many, many people. As many as the stars in the night sky.

How does Abraham respond to God’s promise? [Read 15:6. Abraham simply believes.

That is, Abraham trusts in the promise of God.

And by that faith, Abraham is declared righteous by God.

Now, be careful here in interpreting this: that “by faith” Abraham was accounted righteous before God. You see, this is not Abraham doing what he can to produce enough faith. To show himself worthy before God, by the strength of his faith. This is not Abraham proving the quality of his faith before God will justify him.

The old theologians (神学家) say that our faith in Jesus, our faith IN ITSELF, is empty.

We bring nothing to God. Our faith, say these theologians, is like an empty hand.

An empty hand that simply lays hold of Jesus, and Jesus’ perfect righteousness.

So, the basis or grounds of our justification is only the perfect righteousness of Jesus (耶稣完美的公义) .

It is not producing faith, or showing the quality of our faith, which saves us. Remember, the Bible says that even our faith is a gift of God. We cannot naturally show saving faith.

So, it is by God’s gift of saving faith, we lay hold of Christ. We are saved by Christ ALONE.

Abraham was justified, laying hold of God’s gracious promise, of a seed, an heir, a descendant.

The apostle Paul explain in Galatians 3, that the Seed of Abraham, that Seed with a capital S, is JESUS. Ultimately, Abraham was laying hold of God’s promise to send Jesus.//

Let me explain something else very important to understand this text. It is this: there are two main covenants in the Old Testament. Oh, there are more, but there are two main covenants:

the covenant of grace (恩典之约) , and 2) the covenant of law (律法之约) .

The grace-covenant, and the law-covenant. The law-covenant in its main expression, comes later, in the time of Moses. In the law-covenant God says: “Obey my law and live. Disobey my law and you will die.” But no one can offer to God perfect works of obedience. So that law-covenant is a dead-end road. No one can be saved by it.

Romans 4:15 says that law-covenant only brings on us the “wrath” the “righteous anger” of God.

Why? Because we continually disobey God’s law.

We cannot keep the demands of God’s law-covenant.

That’s why we need the GRACE-covenant. The covenant of grace. This is the covenant displayed in Genesis 15. God comes freely, with promises, to Abraham, including the promise to be saved. Abraham does nothing to earn his salvation, or to deserve being accredited as a righteous man. Nor do we.

Because ultimately, the covenant of grace is fulfilled in Jesus. God credits us with the righteousness of Jesus. As we come with the empty hand of faith. [Read Rom 4:22-25.

How is it for you? If you are trying to be good enough to be saved, you will fail. In fact, you will be continually frustrated, to the point of giving up. Because, you see, you will never be good enough. Oh, you can clean up your morals, somewhat. You can become outwardly more obedient towards God’s laws. Unbelievers can do that, also.

But, inwardly, you see, you will always have wrong desires, wrong attitudes, wrong emotional responses. Inwardly, where God looks, on the heart, you will always be sinful.

So may each of you be trusting only in Jesus. With a simple faith, a child-like trust, may you be trusting in Jesus. With an empty hand, an often weak and trembling hand, lay hold of Jesus and His perfect righteousness. And keep on holding onto Him. The perfect righteousness of Jesus is credited to you. Through faith alone, in Christ alone.//

Let me just point out on more thing in Genesis 15. It is somewhat strange, and it is fairly complicated. God tells Abraham to bring five different kinds of animals. He tells Abraham to cut their bodies in half. And to lay each half on opposite sides of a path. Make a path between the cut apart animals. In vs. 17, we read that God Himself, appearing as a burning torch, walked on that path, between the cut apart animals. And after that somewhat strange event, we read that God made this covenant with Abraham. [Read vs. 18.

What is going on?

Well, notice that Abraham had asked God for some sign, some guarantee, that God would make

good on his promise to give him a biological son. [Read vs. 2. Now, when human covenants were made in those ancient days, there would often be a ceremony like this. With the blood of animals poured out or displayed in some way. The blood of those killed animals was a kind of blood oath.

In that blood oath, each partner in the covenant was promising the other that they promised to uphold their side of the agreement. Specifically, they were saying something like this: "So let ME shed MY blood, let me die, if I do not live up to my promise."

-Notice that in Genesis 15 it is only God Himself, who takes this blood oath. Abraham does not.

At least not yet. He will shed some of his blood, later, in Genesis 17. But not here, in Genesis 15. So in effect, God is giving an added guarantee to His covenant promise. God is saying something like this: "So let me be destroyed, if I do not do what I have promised." The blood of the covenant, seals it. God indeed would give Abraham a son, through Sarah.

That helps us understand something important about Jesus. You see, Jesus is the one who fulfills God's covenant of grace to us. On the night before he was crucified, Jesus took some wine, and said: "This is my blood. It is the blood of the new covenant. For the forgiveness of your sins." Jesus abolishes (废除) the OLD covenant, that old law-covenant. And he establishes the NEW covenant, bringing to completion the covenant with Abraham. The covenant of GRACE.

Our faith can be so weak; even our trust in God's promises can be weak.

So God gives us this gracious sign: Jesus has shed his own blood on that cross. That is the seal (印记), that is the blood-oath (血誓). The guarantee (保证). God guarantees the full forgiveness of all our sin, as we see the blood of Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, that guarantee is for you. As you, like Abraham, simply believe.

As you reach out the hand of faith, that empty hand, and embrace Jesus Christ.

The blood of Jesus is the guarantee. All the righteousness of Jesus is credited to us.

As we simply believe. It is guaranteed by blood. AMEN.