

Sermon 7, God's Covenant II: Abraham's Belief in the Coming Seed, Genesis 15:1-6

God promised Abraham an "exceedingly great reward." What is God's reward? Children! Psalm 127:3, "Lo, children are a heritage of Jehovah; And the fruit of the womb is his reward."

"Now not for his sake only was it written, that it was reckoned to him, but for our sake also, to whom it will be reckoned, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Rom 4:23-24 NAS).

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Proposition: Abram was justified by believing God's promise, and you will be too!

Brothers and sisters, we saw last week that God came to Abram and promised him a sevenfold promise, with five instances of blessing in response to the fivefold cursing that had come on the earth. We saw how Abram's call was God's answer to Babylon, and we saw that that promise God made to Abram has been fulfilled and continues to be fulfilled in the history and destiny of the Jewish people and now the Christian church. Tonight, we see again one of God's paradigmatic dealings with Abram. Just as you need to read the Bible looking for the conflict between the woman's seed and the serpent, and for the fulfillment of God's promise to bless the nations through Abraham, today we'll see that we need to read the Bible looking for the fulfillment of God's promise to give multitudinous descendants to Abraham. More than that, though, we will see that each of us needs to personally trust God to keep His promises. It was that kind of trust which was credited to Abram as righteousness, and this passage was written for

the sake of all of us, so that we would know that God will credit us as righteous when we trust Him to keep His promises.

I. God's Promise: A Numerous Seed, vv. 1-5

Our passage this morning recounts a conversation between God and Abram, and that conversation swirls around two key themes: Abram's childlessness, and God's overwhelming ability to keep all His promises, to do exactly what He's said He will do. In fact, God's promises frame Abram's central complaints. God has the first and last word about every difficulty in our lives — so let's take those difficulties to Him and trust Him for a resolution.

A. God Initiates the Conversation, v. 1

The first thing we should see about this passage is that God initiated the conversation. He's the one who came to Abram the first time, and now He comes to him again. What does this tell us? Not that we aren't allowed to open conversations with God; rather, it tells us that God wants a relationship and is eager to initiate it. It tells us that God comes after us, tracks us down, and speaks to us as we are doing a million and one other things. Are you open to God's voice? I'm not talking so much about nudges and inner feelings, though God can certainly use those too. I'm talking about His revelation, as encapsulated in His word and encountered everywhere, from a church service to a Facebook feed to an opportunity to bless a child or a stranger. God will not let you go; He will pursue you. This is good news. God came to Abram where he was and initiated the conversation with Him. God will send His revelation and His grace to you when, where, and how He pleases. This doesn't mean that you should just sit back and wait for Him; no, you should seek Him too. Scripture is very clear about that. Notice that Abram built altars to God on his journeys. He wasn't just waiting for God to come to Him. But in and through it all, the relationship was ultimately God's idea, and He is the one who started and maintained it. He doesn't want to be aloof; He wants to know us and He wants us to know Him.

1. God Appears to Abram, v. 1a

Not only did God talk to Abram; He also came and showed Himself to Abram. What condescension! What a magnificent gift! I don't know whether any of you have had a visionary experience of any kind; I haven't, though some men I highly respect have. Visionary experiences are not the bedrock of our faith, or of Abram's. But they are a gift, whereby God condescends to our weakness and our need to actually see something before we can feel sure it's there. God came to Abram in a vision.

2. God Calms Abram's Fears, v. 1b

To see God is an overwhelming, terrifying experience. So God's first word to Abram is "Fear not!" This is the most common command in the Bible. God tells us not to fear more than He tells us anything else. Abram had just won a great victory. He could either be puffed up with pride or cast down by fear of reprisals and the envy of his neighbors. You too may be in a place where a bad combination of circumstances might lead you to wonder, to worry, to doubt. You might be fearful about what the future holds. But God's word to you, as it was to Abram, is "Fear not." Brothers and sisters, you have no need to be afraid! You have no need to live in fear. No matter

whether you're looking at the economy, at the political situation, at our military situation, at any number of bad signs or bad reports, God's word to you is "Fear not." Don't be afraid of those things. Why? Because God is trustworthy. Because God is the one you should fear, and if you fear Him rightly, then you need be afraid of nothing else.

3. God Promises to Shield Abram, v. 1c

God gives Abram two reasons in particular why he should not fear. The first is this promise to be a shield. That's a concrete term. We might, for our day and age, when most of us don't fight with swords and shields in our daily lives, substitute the more abstract "protection." God is Abram's protection, Abram's security system, Abram's bodyguard. Now there's a reason not to live in fear! Abram did not to fear bad things happening to him, because God was his protection.

This metaphor is repeated frequently in the Bible, enough to tell us that this promise is not limited to Abram. God is your shield too. Does that mean that you should cross the street without looking, or drive recklessly? Of course not. But because God is your shield, you needn't live in fear. You needn't make decisions based on worst-case scenarios, or live as though your own wits are the only thing between you and destruction. How would your life change if you could really and truly be free from fear? You would have no more need to defend yourself. Your motivation to lie would be gone. Your temptations to lash out and hurt others whom you perceive to be a threat would vanish. Absorbing this promise that God is your shield will change your life.

4. God Promises to Reward Abram, v. 1d

Furthermore, God promises a great reward to Abram. This part of the verse can be translated two ways. Either it says that God Himself is Abram's reward, or that Abram has a great reward. Take your pick; ultimately, both are true. If God Himself is Abram's reward, then Abram does indeed have a great reward! And remember, too, that according to Psalm 127, "Children are a heritage from the LORD, and the fruit of the womb is His reward." Yes, that's right: Children are a reward. And so when God says that Abram will have a great reward, He seems to be punning on the truth that Abram's descendants will be numerous! It may also be a reference to the truth that one of Abram's descendants will be Yahweh: "I, Jehovah, am your shield and your exceedingly great descendant." Is this finding too much here? Perhaps. Yet we know for a certainty that Abraham rejoiced to see the day of Jesus Christ, that he saw it and was glad.

I think we should take the meanings here in the widest version of the literal sense. God will reward Abraham, and that reward will ultimately be Himself.

This promise still stands. Everyone who walks with God and seeks God will have God Himself for a reward, and of course many other lesser things like Heaven, peace of conscience, joy, love, hope, and all other saving graces. That's what I call an exceedingly great reward. As though more could be added to Himself, God promises us benefit upon benefit when we enter His kingdom and follow His commandments.

So where's fear? It's all gone. God is your protection, as He was Abram's. God is your reward, if you truly seek Him. God is the one who wants a relationship with you, who sought

you first. Do you see these things here in this text? Do you respond with faith in the God who initiates? Are you freed to live without fear, and in hope of an overwhelming reward?

B. Abram's Doubled Complaint, vv. 2-3

But Abram, even after this one-verse display of divine fireworks, still has a problem. A massive problem. A problem that needs someone the size of God to fix it.

1. God, I Have No Child!

In verse two, he questions what God will give Him. After God just promised him protection, and Himself for a reward, Abram says, "God, what will you give me?"

Now, first of all, is this not human nature? God comes to you and says, "I'm going to give more than you can imagine; I'm going to give you my own fullness" — to which we respond, "What are you going to give me?"

But Abram's response is probably not that petty and self-serving. Rather, this is a question asked in faith. "God, you made this promise. Keep it! Lord, you said you'd do it. So do it!" Abram knew that God promised to make him a great nation, and yet that promise was not being fulfilled. There was no sign that Abram had or ever would have any children.

Some of you in this room have been married for decades and yet have no children. If someone were to tell you, "God will give you children," you'd say, "I don't think so. I'm pretty sure that part of my life is gone for good." Abram says, "God, I'm childless, and I'm so sure I'll stay that way that I've designated this guy Eliezer as my heir."

Abram saw no hope of future children. Abram was making contingency plans in the event of his death with no son or daughter to inherit his wealth and, more importantly, fulfill the promises of God. Abram correctly recognized that every one of God's promises to him depended on him having children. And that's what gave him the boldness to make this complaint before God.

2. God, I Have No Seed!

Ultimately, it seems, Abram's complaint is a recognition that without Christ and His coming, the rest of it won't much matter. That's why he repeats his complaint in different words here in verse 3. Without children, God's promises will wither and die.

Do you have the faith to plead with God like this? You can call these complaints "doubt" if you want, but they seem to be made out of the conviction of Abram's heart that God will not abandon His promises.

Let me put it this way. Those of you in this room who are past childbearing age, and who have never had children — how often do you pray that God would send you a biological child of your own? I'm guessing you don't. Even if you badly wanted a child for years, you recognize that such things just don't happen. And so you don't bother asking for it, any more than the rest of us ask for God to send 30 inches of rainfall in Gillette this year. It just doesn't happen. So Abram bringing this up twice tells me that he had faith. He believed that God would fulfill His promises, and he knew that in the ordinary course of things, those promises would require Abram to have a biological child.

Do you believe God enough to plead with Him? Are you motivated to call on His name and say, "God, you promised! Do it! Keep that promise! Do what you said you'd do!" Only faith can pray that way. Doubt doesn't bother praying. Doubt says, "Why talk to the empty air, or to the ceiling?" But faith says, "God said He would do it and I know He will, so I'm going to keep asking until He does it." He likes to be asked.

I teach two High School English courses online with HSLDA Online Academy. Whenever I give a student a bad grade, I'm willing to reconsider it. But I leave that in the student's camp. I have yet to turn down someone who writes to me and asks for the opportunity to redo the assignment. But I rarely write to a student and say, "Would you please redo this assignment so I can give you a better grade?" I like to be asked. How much more does our Heavenly Father love to be asked! He wants us to enact faith, to show that we believe Him by asking Him to do what He said He'll do.

C. God's Doubled Promise, vv. 4-5

And God responds to Abram's doubled request with a doubled promise of His own.

1. A Child from Abraham's Own Loins, v. 4

His first promise doesn't even deign to name Eliezer, as if to say, "Abram, your designated heir is unnecessary. This one won't be your heir!" Rather, God's promise of a biological child, of one who will come out of Abram's loins, is redoubled. God will send a seed of promise!

2. Seed as Numerous as the Stars of Heaven, v. 5

And then God makes the promise much bigger, much harder to believe. He goes from promising a child to promising descendants as many as the stars of heaven. Estimates on how many stars can be seen with the naked eye vary, but we know that God has placed billions upon billions of stars out there. Our galaxy alone is estimated to contain anywhere from 100 to 400 billion stars, and there are at least 100 billion other galaxies besides our own Milky Way.

If it took faith to trust God for one child, it really takes faith to trust God for descendants as numerous as that.

Can you trust God when He makes such extravagant promises? Even now, when Abraham has been accumulating descendants for 4000 years, he doesn't yet have descendants like this. Yet we know that God is trustworthy; we know that what He has promised, He is able to perform.

This night sky was an object lesson to Abram, a challenge to Him to trust that God is able to do the unthinkable.

II. Abram's Justification, v. 6

How did Abram respond to this challenge? He believed God. This may be supposed to be a perfect tense, informing us of what had happened before this conversation: Abram *had* believed God already. Regardless, it indicates to us in its current position that Abram believed God then and there. He embraced this promise of a child, of a numerous seed.

A. Abram's Act: Believing Yahweh

What exactly did Abram do? He believed Yahweh. This is more than mere assent to a proposition. This is trust in a person. I've used before the illustration of the tightrope walker who asks, "Do you believe that I can push this wheelbarrow across the tightrope strung over Niagara Falls?" To say "Yes" is knowledge and assent. But to get in the wheelbarrow and let this man push you across is trust.

Abram's act was an act of trust. He internally decided that God was credible and that he was going to rest himself on God and God's promise. He believed God — that is, he rolled himself onto God, he rested on God, he counted on God. He let this matter of an heir out of his own hands and relied on God to take care of it.

B. God's Response: He Counted Abram Righteous

How did God respond to Abram's faith? He counted Him righteous. That is, God imputed to him this quality of being a good person. God treated Abram as one acceptable to Him. God forgave Abram's sins and welcomed him into close relationship with Himself. Why? Because God values faith? Certainly He does. But He doesn't value it enough to say "Anyone who has faith has everything I want." No. He values it because it trusts Him, and recognizes its own emptiness.

Abram knew that he could not bring about the promised seed. He and Sarai had done their best, and they had had no children. It was when he gave up working and instead said, "God, I trust you no matter what" that God declared him acceptable, good, righteous.

Abram believed in the promised seed. Do you? How do you plan to get right with God and stay right with God? By living up to His standards? By doing what He tells you to do? Those are good ideas, but He's already said that if you've violated His standards in the past then it doesn't matter how well you do from now on. A sin is a sin, and every sin deserves God's wrath and curse. The only way to be accepted and stay accepted with God is to trust Him. Abram saw that Christ was coming, and he put his faith in God for that.

Can you believe that God will accept you? Can you trust that He will deal with your biggest problem, your sin, and lead you to Himself?

This story tells us how God came to Abram and made a promise to Him. It tells us to read the Bible as the story of how God kept His promise to give Abram a numerous seed. But it also tells us that we need to trust God, because He is still trustworthy. God is still the God who kept His word to Abram. He is still the God who does the impossible. He is still the only one who can declare you righteous. Will you trust Him? Will you recognize that God is trustworthy, not just for children but for eternal life? Believe in Him, and you will be counted righteous. Amen.