

“Abram Believed God”
(Genesis 15)

Tonight, we come to one of the most important passages in all of Scripture, the one quoted most often by the New Testament writers to prove that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, and not in any measure by our works. It’s also important because it shows us that salvation was always given in this way. There was never a time -- as some dispensationalists have believed -- when God saved His people through their works. If this was true, then there would have been some who never needed Christ. If this was true, then as Paul says, salvation would have indeed been through the keeping of the Law (Gal. 3:21). Furthermore, Christ wouldn’t have had to die. But this can’t be the case. The Bible says we were born into this world already guilty of the sin of Adam, already under condemnation. We have sinned from the very earliest years of our lives, from the time we were born to the present. And we will continue to sin throughout our lives until we die. Even with the grace of God in our hearts, we cannot live perfect lives, though we would like to with all that is in us. And if a perfect life is what God requires, if that is the price we must pay to get into heaven, then none of us will ever get there on our own. Well that is what God requires, and we can’t get there on our own. So God has given us what He requires in Christ. That is why He sent Him into the world - - to do what we couldn’t do and to die to take away the sins we had committed, but could never remove. And if we will only believe in Christ, if we will only turn from our sins and trust in Him, if we will only love Him and serve Him, we will be saved. His righteousness will be reckoned to us. This is what Abram did so many years ago. Abram believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. The Lord wanted this written down, so that we too might know how to be saved.

Now our passage begins just after the war between Abram and the four kings. God had confirmed to Abram that He was intending to keep His promise to give him the land, to make him a great nation, and to make his seed a blessing to all the nations, by allowing him to defeat that mighty army, as well as by sending Melchizedek -- that great type and picture of the Lord Jesus Christ -- to him with bread and wine -- the symbols of the Covenant of Grace -- as well as through the blessing that he pronounced upon Abram in the name of the Lord. Now, when all this was done, the Lord again appeared to Abram in a vision, and said to him, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great” (v. 1). God had just preserved him through his battle with these kings. He had become Abram’s shield. Through this He was showing Abram that He would never allow anything to happen to him outside of His holy will. The Lord was going to fulfill His promise to him. This can be a great comfort to us as well, for this is also what the Lord is for us. The psalmist wrote in Psalm 119:114, “Thou art my hiding place and my shield; I wait for Thy Word.” If there was ever a reason not to be afraid, this was it. If the Lord is for us, who can be against us (Rom. 8:31)? Why then was Abram afraid? It might have been because he feared that these kings would return and seek revenge. After all, he had taken away all of their spoils of war. And what would the other nations think about their defeat at the hands of this man and his few allies? But how could he be afraid, if the Lord was watching over him? Well, ask yourself why you are afraid when you are in similar situations? It can only be because of a lack of faith. We don’t trust the Lord as we should. We don’t believe that He will protect us, as long as we are faithful to walk in His ways. This is one of the main

reasons we don't evangelize as we should. But remember human weakness and fear is why the Lord gave Abram so many signs to confirm His promise. He wanted to strengthen his faith. He wanted him to believe. It doesn't bring honor to the Lord to doubt Him. This is also why He confirms His promises to us through His Word, sacraments and Spirit. He wants to strengthen our faith. The Lord is faithful. We can trust Him. Abram may also have been afraid because of the fact that the Lord had just appeared to him in a vision. This was often the way those who saw visions would respond. It is a terrifying thing to stand in the presence of God. God is a God to be feared. And it's not bad to fear Him. As a matter of fact, Solomon tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10). But we must never forget that in Christ, our fear is taken away, for fear involves punishment (1 John 4:18) and Jesus has taken away our judgment by taking it upon Himself.

But notice what else the Lord said to Abram. He said, "Your reward will be very great." Now it can be translated this way, as it is in the NASB, or it can be translated, "I am . . . your exceeding great reward," as it is in the KJV. Both are possible. Certainly the second better fits the truth, for God is the exceeding great reward of His people. That's what heaven is all about: receiving God as our reward, as our everlasting treasure. Either way, Abram's reward was going to be great. It was just a question of how great. Remember, Abram had just given up a fortune in food and goods, and in livestock and animals. He gave these things up because he had a greater treasure -- he had the Lord and His promises. But now the Lord again renewed His covenant promise with Abram and made it even clearer exactly what that reward was to be, and how He was going to fulfill it. He was going to give Abram a son. The Lord had told Abram earlier that He would make him into a great nation. But you need to have a child, a son, even to start. Abram didn't have any. All he had was a servant who was born in his house. Abram said to the Lord, "O Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus" (v. 2). According to the customs of that culture, Eliezer of Damascus -- probably his closest and most trusted servant --, would have been Abram's heir by way of adoption. Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir" (v. 3). What a disappointment this would have been for Abram who was expecting so much more from the hand of the Lord. But the Lord said this one would not be his heir, but one who would come forth from his own body (v. 4). "And He took him outside and said, 'Now look towards the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be'" (v. 5). The Lord would not only give him one son and let his line die there, He would give Him as many children as the stars in the sky, as many as the dust of the ground or the sand of the sea -- an innumerable number of children, which refers not only to the children that would come forth from his loins, but also to those who would be of the same faith as Abram. And the Scripture says, "Abram believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (v. 6). He believed not only that God would give him this numerous seed in the form of children, but he also believed that the Lord would give Him the seed, the Messiah, the One through whom all the nations would be blessed. He looked beyond the types and pictures and shadows and promises which the Lord had made to him and saw the reality. Jesus said to the Jews, "'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw *it* and was glad.' The Jews therefore said to Him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?'" (John 8:56). Jesus didn't say that He saw Abraham, but that Abraham saw Him, or His day, although Jesus, as the eternal God, certainly did see Abraham. But how did Abraham see Him? Well, as I said, he saw Him through the promises. God said to Abram that through him, all the nations would be blessed (Gen. 12:3). God showed him through his military victories, that his seed

would eventually possess the whole earth (Gen. 14). And He showed him through Melchizedek -- that great type of Christ -- that this seed would be a king and a priest. Abram saw Christ, and he trusted in Him, and the Lord credited it to him as righteousness. Now I believe that Abram before this time was already converted, but here it was written down so that there wouldn't be any mistake as to how Abram was saved. He wasn't saved by his works, but through the righteousness of the coming Redeemer. Paul writes in Romans 4:1-5, "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to Him as righteousness.' Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness."

Now we need to understand what the Lord is saying here and what He is not saying. He is not saying that God reckons or counts our faith as righteousness, as though there is something praiseworthy about our faith. There are those who believe that it is our faith that literally saves us. It is something we do to earn the gift of salvation. But the Scripture says that we wouldn't have any faith at all, if it were not for God's mercy and grace in giving us the new birth in the first place. The new birth is a sovereign act of God's Holy Spirit, Jesus tells us in John 3. It is the gift of God, Paul tells us in Ephesians 2. That's not what He means. What He does mean is that by our looking entirely away from ourselves and our own works to Christ and His righteous works alone for our salvation, God gives us that righteousness as a free gift. God credits that righteousness to our account. We came into this world as paupers. We were less than poor, we were already infinitely in debt to God's justice, because of Adam's sin. There was nothing we could possibly have done to pay off our debts, not to mention earn the credit we needed to enter into heaven. But through His death, Jesus cancelled our debts, and through His obedience, He earned the credit, the righteousness, we needed to enter into heaven. All we must do is, like Abram, look to Him in faith, trust in Him to take away our sins and receive His perfect record of lawkeeping as a free gift of His grace. If we look at all to our works, or trust in them in any way for our salvation, then we are not looking to Christ alone. It is not by our works, but by His grace, by the works of our Lord Jesus Christ given to us as a free gift. In a sense, we are in the same position that Abram was. He didn't see Christ face to face. He could only see Christ through the eyes of faith as he looked through the shadows. We also can't see Him, at least we can't look at Him with our eyes. We must also look to Him in faith, now not as the Christ who is coming, but as the Christ who has already come. And if we look to Him in faith, it will also be reckoned to us as righteousness. This is the only way you, or I, or anyone else will ever be saved. As we have seen, this is the only way anyone has ever been saved. And so if you have not trusted in Christ, do so now. Reach out to Him in faith and receive His free gift of salvation. If you already have, then tell someone else about the gift that the Lord offers to them, if they will only repent and come to Him in faith. Learn the Gospel of grace well, so that you might truly be able to lead those who are headed to death, to everlasting life. Amen.