

The Way to God 2-18-07

Genesis 15:1-6 (NIV)

¹ After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." ² But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." ⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." ⁵ He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

We have come to one of the most important passages in the Old Testament. It is so important, not because of the subject at hand, which was the lack of an heir, but because of the declaration of how righteousness is credited to man. All religions are an effort to find a way to God. There is even a religion called the way, Tao. Christianity was first called The Way. (Acts 9:2) Man senses the need to be right with the Creator. When we are honest with ourselves, we realize that we are not righteous. When people are on their deathbed, there is an awakened sense of the need to reconcile oneself with God.

Steve Turner, a British journalist, wrote a sarcastic work on the beliefs of our day. You may have heard it on one of Ravi Zacharias' radio programs. He really put together the insanity of our postmodern way of thinking. See if you can't relate to many of his expressions through things you've seen and heard in the media.

"We believe in Marx, Freud, and Darwin. We believe everything is okay as long as you don't hurt anyone to the best of your definition of hurt and to the best of your definition of knowledge. We believe in sex before, during, and after marriage. We believe in the therapy of sin. We believe that adultery is fun. We believe that Sodomy is okay. We believe that taboos are taboo. We believe everything is getting better despite evidence to the contrary. The evidence must be investigated and you can prove anything with evidence. We believe there is something in horoscopes, UFOs and bent spoons. Jesus was a good man, just like Buddha, Mohammed, and ourselves. He was a good moral teacher, although we think His good morals were really bad. We believe that all religions are basically the same, at least the one that we read was. They all believe in love and goodness. They only differ in matters of creation, sin, heaven, hell, God, and salvation. We believe that after death comes the nothing, because when you ask the dead what happens, they say nothing. If death is not the end, and the dead have lied, then there is compulsory heaven for all except for possibly Hitler, Stalin, and Genghis Chan. We believe in Masters and Johnson. What's selected is average, what's normal is good. We believe in total disarmament. We believe there are direct links between warfare and bloodshed. We believe that man is essentially good. It's only his behavior that lets him down. This is the fault of society; society is the fault of conditions; conditions are the fault of

Commented [notes1]: 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. Acts 9:2 (NIV)

society. We believe that each man must find the truth that is right for him and reality will adapt accordingly, the universe will readjust and history will alter. We don't believe in absolute truth except the truth that there are no absolute truths. We believe in the rejection of creeds and the flowering of individual thought." His postscript reads, "If chance be the father of all flesh, disaster is his rainbow in the sky, and when you hear state of emergencies, sniper kills ten, troops on rampage, youths go looting, bomb blast in school, it is but the sound of man worshipping his maker."

Either there is a just God who will call us to account for our lives, or nothing matters. (Matthew 12:36) Do you see that? Think it through. If you die and cease to exist, or if you go to some other plane without some kind of reconciliation, what does it matter how anyone lives? Why does anything matter? That is why religions come up with ideas like purgatory and karma. There must be some accounting for life or there is chaotic anarchy, with any rules being important only if you are caught.

You could say that it matters because it affects this life. Maybe you don't believe in the afterlife, but you still believe that what you do will affect the quality of this brief life. I ask you, "Why?" Why would it affect you unless there is a God who sees to it that you reap what you have sown? (Galatians 6:8) Why not commit very clever crimes and hope to get away with it, because after all, this is all there is. If there is a God that sees that we reap what we sow, do you really think He made you for your short selfish lifespan? I say "selfish" because if I'm just good because of how it will affect me, isn't that called selfishness?

So how are we made right with God? How can we die with a peace that God will accept us? And just as importantly, how can we live a life of meaning and eternal purpose? I can tell you true story after story of famous atheists that died in screaming dread, and I can tell you even more stories of Christians that died with a smile and even stories of their visions of angels coming to welcome them into heaven. Our text today tells us how you can find that purpose to live and peace in death through peace with God. (Proverbs 8:35)

Let's go through it verse by verse. ¹ After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." After rescuing Lot, meeting with the priest of the Most High God, Melchizedek, and refusing to take any of the goods recovered for the Sodomites, this vision came to Abram. We might be able to get some idea of what was going on in Abram's mind by what the LORD said to him. First, God told him not to be afraid. Was that because of the vision, or because Abram was wondering if the kings he defeated were going to return with a larger army and seeking revenge? It is hard for us who have never lived in a war zone to imagine the dread that many people experience on a daily basis. The lawlessness of much of the world makes daily life filled with uncertainty, and that was common in the days of Abram. I imagine Abram was wondering how his little band would deal with a counterstrike.

Commented [notes2]: 36 But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. Matt 12:36 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: 8 The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Gal 6:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: 35 For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the LORD. Prov 8:35 (NIV)

It is often after a great victory that we sink into depression and fear. For some reason we muster the faith for something amazing and then run from the everyday. Elijah called on God to send fire from heaven, slew the false prophets of Baal, and then out ran a chariot, but the next day he was running from one woman. (1Kings 19:2,3) The enemy of our soul is always looking for a situation in which we will turn from faith to reliance upon self. As soon as we do that, we inevitably become discouraged, because we see our own weaknesses.

God gave Abram and you and me a reason not to fear. "I am your shield." If the Creator of the heavens and the earth is my shield, what can man do against me? (Psalm 118:6) Let that sink in. And if He removes the shield and allows something to strike me, I must know that there is a reason. (Job 1:12) What courage we can have when we know that God is our shield! The word for shield can also be translated "sovereign". If God is my Sovereign, the One who orders the details of my days, what have I to fear? Where was Abram when the kings of the North attacked? He was safely 20 miles out of their path. Why didn't the kings come through that area? Because God is sovereign, the shield of those who trust in Him. Later, God will tell Israel that He is their shield and their glorious sword. (Deuteronomy 33:29 Psalm 115:9-11) In the New Testament we will see that faith is our shield. (Ephesians 6:17) Faith comes from hearing the Word of God. (Romans 10:17) Jesus is the Word. (John 1:14) What peace we can have in this life when we know the Lord is our shield!

But God didn't stop there. He added that He was Abram's very great reward. Last Sunday's message was on that promise to us. I hope you took time to think about the greatness of that promise through the week. We can so easily become distracted by lesser rewards. The victorious Christian life is focused on the LORD alone as our exceeding great reward.

Abram had just given Lot the best of the land, and given the King of Sodom back all the wealth he had recaptured, but God said his reward was very great. I believe the text is saying that Abram's friendship with God, the intimacy of his relationship with God, is greater than anything this world has to offer. His reward isn't just the greatness of worldly things, it is an exceedingly great reward, a far surpassingly great reward. It is something greater than the kings of the earth amass. It is an eternal relationship that made everything in his life of eternal value. There could be no greater reward. It is the reward that Esau and Noah discovered and they discovered it in the same way that Abram did, by faith.

"² But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"³ And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." Abram was careful to address God as sovereign when he voiced his complaint. The promises sounded great, but Abram's heart was burdened with what was right in front of him. He was childless. Eliezar could be adopted and be a son and heir. That was common in that day. But Abram wanted a son of his own. In Genesis 12:7 God had promised that the seed of Abram would inherit the land, and

Commented [notes5]: 2 So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them."
3 Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there,
1 Kings 19:2-3 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: 6 The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?
Psalms 118:6 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: 12 The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger." Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.
Job 1:12 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: 29 Blessed are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD? He is your shield and helper and your glorious sword. Your enemies will cower before you, and you will trample down their high places. "
Deut 33:29 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: 9 O house of Israel, trust in the LORD-- he is their help and shield.
10 O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD-- he is their help and shield.
11 You who fear him, trust in the LORD-- he is their help and shield.
Psalms 115:9-11 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.
Eph 6:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes11]: 17 Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.
Romans 10:17 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: 14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.
John 1:14 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: 7 The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.
Gen 12:7 (NIV)

it just wasn't happening. Abram was surely glad to have God as his shield and great reward, but what about the promise of an heir?

Sometimes we see what God has promised us in His Word. It is sometimes too big to grasp. We should be jumping up and down with joy, filled with expectation and encouragement, but instead we are depressed about the immediate need we see right before our eyes. Whether it is a trial, an affliction, or an unfulfilled promise, it so fills our vision that the promises of God seem like pie in the sky. We need God's word for what is burdening our heart. Will we ever get the victory? Will we ever get passed the hardship? Notice that verse 3 is almost a repetition of verse 2. When we are so caught up with a concern, we tend to voice it over and over. We are desperate for someone to understand how heavy it is on our heart.

I suppose great faith would focus on the great promises of God so that our little concerns would fade in insignificance. That seems to be the testimony of Enoch. But most of us are more like Abram. We need a word about the thing that seems to be such a burden.

Abram heard what he needed to hear. ⁴ *Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir."* God confirmed again, now for the fourth time, that he would have an heir. This time God said it as plainly as it could be said, "...from your own body..." Abram was getting along in years. Sarai was at that age where the body quits its reproductive cycles. (Romans 4:20)

God made it even clearer yet. ⁵ *He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."* He took him outside. This vision of the LORD ushered Abram out of his tent to make a point. I have looked at the night sky over Lake Powell. We used to lie on the roof of a houseboat and count shooting stars until we fell asleep. The Milky Way is clearly visible as a cloud of stars across the sky. To even begin to count them is foolish. Do you see how God was encouraging and prodding the faith of Abram? Look at the ground and see the dust. Look in the sky and see the stars. Believe! It looks impossible from where you stand, but from where the Lord stands, it is a small thing. What is one child miraculously born to an aging couple compared to making the dust from which we are made? What is one child compared to the Galaxies flung into space, one little spec upon which you ride through space, smaller than dust itself? Dust, stars, is not this the material with which He made us in the first place? Then why should we doubt He could give a child to an elderly couple? (Luke 1:37)

⁶ *Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.* There it is. Such a simple statement, and yet it holds the answer so many seek. Three chapters of the New Testament focus on this phrase. It is the foundation for the New Covenant. Centuries before the Law was recorded, Abram found the way to God. He believed the LORD. It isn't that he didn't believe before. There is some kind of exchange that takes place here. It is no longer going to be a burden to him. He will no longer ask God for a sign or plead with God. In fact, the next time the Lord tells

Commented [notes14]: 19 Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead--since he was about a hundred years old--and that Sarah's womb was also dead.
Romans 4:19 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: 37 For nothing is impossible with God."
Luke 1:37 (NIV)

him that he will still have a son, he laughs a laugh of incredulity, amazed at what God is about to do. [Genesis 17:17](#)

Commented [notes16]: 17 Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?"
Gen 17:17 (NIV)

God took that faith Abram put in Him and credited it to Abram as righteousness. He didn't see Abram was perfect and declare him righteous. He counted his believing faith as righteousness. This is how everyone is saved. This is our path to God. Just believe Him. As Paul and Silas told the Philippian jailor who was desperate to know the way to God, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." [Acts 16:31](#) Just believe, and God will credit you with righteousness.

Commented [notes17]: 31 They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household."
Acts 16:31 (NIV)

In Romans 4, Paul quoted this verse, Genesis 15:1, three times and used the word "credited" eleven times! What was the Apostle telling us in regards to this verse? He explained that if Abram had earned righteousness by a perfect life, God would not have used the word credited, but instead would have used "earned". Paul's conclusion is that anyone who casts themselves upon God to make them righteous is made righteous just as Abram was, by faith. ([Romans 4:3-5](#))

Commented [notes18]: 3 What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."
4 Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.
5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.
Romans 4:3-5 (NIV)

He goes on to use David as an example. David broke three of the Ten Commandments, covetousness, adultery, and murder. The Law provided no solution to premeditated sin. ([Numbers 15:30-31](#)) But Paul points to Psalm 32 as evidence that David was righteous by faith when he cast himself upon the LORD, placing his trust in Him. Paul quotes verse 7 and 8 in which David has found the sweet relief of forgiveness. ⁷ "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered." ⁸ "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him." [Romans 4:7-8](#) (NIV) (In rabbinical tradition it is fair to compare the texts for the same word is used in Genesis 15:6, "credited" and "count" in Psalm 32. (See LXX *logizesthai* or in the Hebrew *hasab*)) How did David find this way to God? How did he rid himself of guilt and free himself from the justice he deserved? He tells us in Psalm 55. ¹⁶ *You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.* ¹⁷ *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.* [Psalms 51:16-17](#) (NIV) It wasn't by doing anything. It was when he cast himself upon the Lord, broken and contrite, believing in the mercy of God, that God could make a way. It was there he found the blessedness of forgiveness.

Commented [notes19]: 30 "But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or alien, blasphemes the LORD, and that person must be cut off from his people.
31 Because he has despised the LORD's word and broken his commands, that person must surely be cut off; his guilt remains on him."
Num 15:30-31 (NIV)

Paul tells us that this was always God's plan. Before the Law was given, Abram believed and was credited with righteousness. Then his descendents and all who come to God in simple belief can follow this same path, the path of trusting belief.

He brings it up again in his letter to the Galatians. ⁶ *Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."* ⁷ *Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.* ⁸ *The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you."* ⁹ *So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.* [Galatians 3:6-9](#) (NIV) Here, he ties the promises to Abram together, that the world would be blessed and that righteousness is by belief. His conclusion is that all who have faith to believe are also blessed like Abram.

Finally, the Lord's brother James takes it a step further. ²¹ *Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?* ²² *You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.* ²³ *And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend.* ²⁴ *You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.* James 2:21-24 (NIV) James is not telling us that works saved Abram or us. He is telling us that real faith is evidenced by works.

When God credits you with righteousness, your life will change. (2 Corinthians 5:17) The faith you have begins to effect the decisions you make and the way you live. The righteousness you have in the eyes of God begins to manifest itself in your life in an increasing way. If that is not true, you may have been moved by the Spirit, but you have not come to genuine belief. Belief is to commit your trust to something or someone. We can be moved by the Spirit and continue to trust in our self.

Are you a Believer? Jesus spoke to people who thought they were saved with these words, ²⁴ *I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am [the one I claim to be], you will indeed die in your sins.* John 8:24 (NIV) ³⁷ *I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word.* John 8:37 (NIV) ³⁹ *"Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did.* John 8:39 (NIV) Do you see where Paul and James got their teaching? It came from Jesus. Do you believe? Do you have room in your heart for His word? Are you doing the works of Abraham? Abram believed and it was credited to him as righteousness. Put your name there in place of Abram and say it with me. Paul believed and it was credited to him as righteousness. It is a word of peace to all who do believe. It is direction for those who have not yet believed. It is judgment for those who have no room for His Word.

Commented [notes20]: 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!
2 Cor 5:17 (NIV)