**ABRAM WAS MADE RIGHTEOUS BY HIS FAITH**

 November 26, 2017

Genesis 15:1-21

Key verse 15:6 “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness”

In the previous chapter, Abram was a warrior full of spirit and power. When he heard that Lot was taken captive by Kedorlaomer, he immediately launched a rescue operation for his nephew Lot. He was fearless, going against the most powerful king at that time with only 318 men. Can you imagine Abram who was galloping with his long white hair, blown back and his burning eyes toward the enemies without any fear? Look at his swift attack upon the enemies and his sword brandishing in the night air. However, in today’s passage, Abram is very different. He looks like just an ordinary old man who is in his middle 80’s. He looks tired, gloomy and even fearful. God comes to him and encourages him with his word. And Abram believes the Lord and it is credited to him as righteousness, which becomes a big milestone in his life of faith. We love to be justified, feel right with God, and feel good about ourselves. We work hard to maintain that feeling of righteousness. Sometimes we put others down in order to preserve our own reputations. We make excuses to justify our actions. Some of the excuses are “I am just weak.” (It is not my fault.) “That is who I am.” (I am a sinner, you will just have to live with that fact.) “I am sorry, please forgive me.” (Let’s get this over with as quickly as possible.) Rather than to justify ourselves, we need to believe that God makes it right. Only faith in Jesus Christ makes us righteous.

Look at verse 1. After Abram’s great victory, the word of the Lord came to him in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” Why did God appear to Abram all of sudden and say this? According to what God said to Abram, we can surmise that Abram was in trouble. In fact, he was depressed and fearful. Though he had defeated such a mighty army with his 318 men, he feared that they might come back at any time for revenge. Abram had seemingly gained nothing from this war: Lot went back to live in Sodom; and he refused take any of the spoils of the war. Abram suffered a sense of loss and worried about his life.

Have you ever felt like Abram did? Probably, many of you understand this Abram very well. There are always uptimes and downtimes in our Christian life. Working for God is a wonderful privilege and grace for us. There is a time, however, when we are lonely, tired and regretful. Sometimes, we want to go somewhere forgetting all our problems. But remember this: God understands us and always helps us in a difficult time. When Abram was in trouble, God came to him and encouraged him with his word: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield; I am your very great reward.” God first helped Abram to look at God rather than himself. When we look at ourselves and our lives without faith in God, everything looks hopeless and meaningless. We become more discouraged and depressed. This is what Abram was doing. We must come out to God and hear his word because only the word of God can help us.

First, God said to Abram that he was his shield. In other words, he himself would protect Abram. “Abram, don’t you remember how I protected you and your wife in Egypt? How did I protect you from Kedorlaomer and give you a victory? Don’t worry, Abram. I am with you. I will protect you.” People depend on money, a good job, worldly power, knowledge, or insurance for their protection. But none of them can protect us. But those who depend on God are under God’s protection. We believers do not even fear death. King David was in battle all his life, so his life was in danger always. But he said that God was his fortress, his shield and the horn of his salvation. (Ps 8:1,2) When God is our shield, we are safe.

Second, God is his great reward. God’s word, “I am your great reward,” was God’s assurance that Abram would lose nothing. Abram thought that he got nothing from his victory. But God said that he did not lose anything. Actually, God himself was his very great reward. God understood that Abram wanted to see visible reward like wealth, power, and most of all his own children. However, God also wanted him to know that any reward in the world could not be greater than God himself because everything perishes but only God lasts forever. There was a missionary in China. His ministry was unfruitful for many years. Though he spent the prime of his life for serving sheep in China, he did not win any single convert. But finally after many years, he won a person. He was so happy that he gave the sheep a clock as a gift. But as soon as the sheep received the clock as a reward, he left. Like him, sometimes, we feel empty and suffer a sense of loss when we bear no fruit after hard work for many years. But God says, “I am your very great reward.” Though sometimes we can’t see fruit now, may God help us look to God alone and receive God as our true reward.

Abram did not let go of his fear and self-pity. This kind of human thinking revived his deep, long hidden problem. He had no son, no heir. He could not accept God’s word. Instead, he cried out to God, “O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” Abram did not know that God himself was his reward and complained, “Lord, it sounds good that you will give me reward. But I have no son who can inherit my estate. What is the point of your reward if I have no son. You’ve promised me descendants. But still I have no children. Did I misunderstand you?” Abram honestly laid out his complaints before the Lord. It is not bad to be honest with God and lay out all your problems rather than bottling up your feelings.

God answered Abram’s prayer. For the first time, God specifically promised him a son from his own body. Look at verse 4: “Then the word of Lord came to him: ‘This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” God clarified and confirmed his promise that he had given to Abram. (12:2, 13:15-16) Then God took him outside of his small, dark tent and made him look up at the stars. The black desert sky was filled with bright stars of all magnitudes. People who live in the city cannot imagine the splendor of the sky full of stars. Have you ever counted the stars in the sky? How many stars can you count? There are approximately 10,000 stars we can see with bare eyes. And there are 200 billions of stars in the Milky Way and many more in the universe. God said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them.” The Creator of heaven and earth had made each one and had hung each one in its place. But Abram, bound by his human limits, could not even count them. The Almighty Creator God promised, “So shall your offspring be.”

God challenged Abram’s unbelief, “Abram, don’t look at yourself. Look at heavens. Count the stars if indeed you can count them. I will give you numerous descendants.” Nothing is impossible with God. There is no problem with God. But the problem is with us. Our unbelief is the problem. Like Abram, sometimes we are doubtful about ourselves, our ministry. Someone thinks that he is not able so he cannot graduate and get a good job. Someone complains, “I have no fruit yet. And I am getting old!” We often say that it is hard to study with even one student; it is too hard to raise one disciple. But now God encourage us to look up at heavens and count the stars. God says, “Why do you say it is impossible? Why do you think you have nothing?” God wants us to look at God the Creator, not ourselves. He wants us know that God will give us more than we can imagine. Now he challenges our unbelief: “Count the stars. So shall your offspring be!” Imagine having an elephant in your room. It is so big that it may crush us. But if we look up at God, he helps us to look at the elephant from his point of view. If you look at an elephant from CN tower, it looks very small. Likewise, when we look up at God, the problem is still there, but it looks like nothing.

How then did Abram respond? Look at verse 6: “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” While looking at the stars, Abram’s eyes were opened and he saw the power of God displayed in the sky and he could get out of his own thoughts and his problems. And he heard God’s promise: “So shall your offspring be.” He came to believe God. He believed God’s promise. Romans 4:18-21 explain Abram’s faith very well. Humanly speaking, chances were zero that he would have a son from his own body. But against all hope, Abram believed. His faith was not weakened though Sarai’s womb was dead. He did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God. Rather, he was strengthened in his faith. He fully believed that God had power to do what he had promised. Abram also believed that God was faithful to his promise. Hebrews 11:11 says that by faith Abraham was enabled to become a father because he considered God faithful who had made the promise. God never says, “Oops! I am sorry. I made a mistake.” His promise is never changed. God never revokes his promise. His promise is always fulfilled without fail. Therefore, we can trust in the Lord, and so we know that his promise is true.

When Abram believed the Lord, his inner fear disappeared. His worries about a future heir disappeared. Though his human circumstances had not changed at all and still he had nothing in his hand, his faith made him different. Let’s read verse 6: “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” The word “credit” means account, consider, or declare. And “righteousness” means right relationship with God. In other words, though Abram was not righteous, God considered him righteous based on his faith. Abram was an old man; he made many mistakes; he used his wife Sarai to save his life. Sometimes, he complained, doubted, and wanted to do things in his own way. But he had faith. He believed the Lord and his faith pleased God. So, God has made him the father of faith for all believers. His faith is the same as our faith in Jesus. (Rom 4:23,24) We cannot be righteous by our good deeds, our will, or our knowledge. But God credits righteousness to those who believe in Jesus Christ. God makes promises. When a person believes even one promise, God cleanses him from sin and takes hold of his life. He comes to dwell in the believing heart of one who accepts his word, and he establishes a right relationship with the one who believes in his promises.

When he was hopeless about having an heir, Abram had not been interested in the land. But now he was concerned about the land where his descendants would live and remembered God’s promise of the land (12:7; 13:15). So God wanted to confirm his promise concerning the land as well. Look at verse 7: “I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.” But Abram wondered at how this would be accomplished, “O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?”

Look at verses 9,10. God told Abram to prepare a heifer, which is a cow, a goat and a ram along with a dove and a young pigeon. Abram immediately understood that God was about to make a covenant with him. A covenant is an agreement or a contract between two parties. In those days, covenants were made by the sacrificial cutting of animals. The two parties to the covenant cut the carcasses of the animals in two and placed each piece opposite to the other. And then both parties would walk together on the bloody ground through the animal pieces, repeating the terms of the covenant. This meant that the covenant was made by blood and so it was deadly serious. If one party broke the covenant, the failing party would be cursed and cut in two just like the sacrificed animals. Now the sacrificial animals were ready and Abram waited on God. As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep. God appeared to Abram in a thick and dreadful darkness. Look at verses 12-15. God first told Abram that his descendants would be enslaved and mistreated in Egypt four hundred years. But God would raise Abram’s descendants as a nation there and bring them back to Canaan. They would be used as God’s instrument to punish Amorites for their sins. God already had a plan of how to make Abram’s descendants a nation though Abram did not even have a son yet! God would use Egypt to train and foster them strong enough to conquer the land of Canaan. God is in control and he drives the history according to his salvation plan. If Abram’s family had remained in Canaan, it would have been impossible for them to grow into a nation. As children were born, they would leave one by one, as Lot had done, and would be assimilated into the Canaanite culture and be melted into Canaan. But living in Egypt, they would share a common history of suffering and oppression, and a common history of deliverance. Egypt was a womb for the baby Israel, and Exodus was the birth of the nation Israel. It was God’s amazing plan.

Look at verse 17. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. God passed through the animal pieces and signed for the covenant, confirming his promise. He promised to give to Abram’s descendants the land. The land he promised was all the land Abram’s foot had touched—from Ur beyond the Euphrates to the River of Egypt. It was the whole known world to Abram. Geographically speaking, this covenant was fulfilled under King Solomon. (1 Kings 8:65) However, spiritually speaking, God is still fulfilling this covenant through Jesus Christ. When we conquer a land with the gospel of Jesus Christ, Abram is claiming the land through Jesus, his descendant. Let’s pray that we may conquer the University of Toronto with the gospel so that Abram may claim this land as his own.

In this passage, we have learned that God’s promise is true and nothing is impossible with God. But our unbelief makes it hard for us to have hope in our sheep, our ministry, our nation, and ourselves. Now God is challenging us to look at heavens and count the stars and believe Him. Then God makes it right.