

Righteous by Faith Alone

Genesis 15:1-6

August 10, 2025 (Pen. 9-C)

St. Paul's Lutheran, North Freedom

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."

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?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

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." 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."

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (Gen. 15:1-6 NIV84)

In the name of Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, dear fellow believers:

"Space Station Salvation" was the theme of our Vacation Bible School last week. The sun and moon, stars and planets were all part of our lessons that focused on the Light of the World, Jesus, and God's plan of salvation. One of our lessons included this reading from Genesis 15, and you can see why: God showed the patriarch Abram all the stars of the sky, invited him to count them all, if he could (Abram couldn't), and the LORD promised him: "So shall your offspring be": Numerous! Countless like the stars in the sky!

We're told that "Abram believed the LORD." In Hebrew, it's like: "Abram said 'AMEN' to what the LORD said." To believe is to be certain that what God says is true, that his promise will be kept. And we're told that the Lord credited" his faith "as righteousness." Our salvation stands on this truth that we are righteous by faith. Indeed, we are **Righteous by Faith Alone**.

Our being declared "righteous" or in the right by God is an amazing thing, when you consider God says this in the face of human weakness. Consider Abram—later called Abraham by God. Ten years before our text, he was called out from his homeland by God to settle in a foreign territory, surrounded by idol-worshippers. As Abram settled there, the Lord granted him prosperity and victory over enemies. Still he felt afraid and uncertain. So the Lord appeared to assure him: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield." God would continue to protect him.

And God promised to be Abram's "very great reward." Abram recalled the promise ten years before: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.... [A]ll peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:2,3). Quite a promise—especially considering Abram was by this time 85, Sarai his wife was 75, and they were still childless!

But Abram still felt uncertain. "O Lord, what great reward can I have, since I'm childless?" Abram figured that, since Sarah was past the age of child-bearing, the heir to his estate would not be a son from his own body, but his head-servant, Eliezer. "A servant in my household will be my heir," Abram thought. And even after the Lord got more specific—"This man will not be your heir,

but a son coming from your own body will be your heir”—in the next chapter we hear Abram and Sarai taking matters into their own hands, having Abram sleep with their maidservant, Hagar, to get that child and the great nation. This and other incidents recorded in Genesis—like the time he lied to a king and pretended Sarah was his sister, not his wife, because he was afraid—show us that Abraham was not at all righteous according to the law; he was a weak, sinful human being.

Just like the rest of us. St. Paul hit the nail on the head when he wrote in Romans, “No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law” (Ro. 3:20); and to the Galatians (2:16): “By observing the law no one will be justified,” or declared not guilty of sin. Not Abraham, though he’s considered “Father of the faithful.” Not the apostles, whose sins and weaknesses are on display throughout the New Testament. Certainly not you and me. We’re too aware of our own sins and shortcomings. How weak we are! How sinful our minds, our words, and our actions get! How could we hope to be righteous before God when we look at ourselves!

Yet God found a way to call us righteous. God overcame our human weakness by the grace of his heavenly power. God would be Abraham’s great reward and achieve what humanly speaking is impossible. He promised that Abraham’s children and descendants, coming from his own body, would indeed be as numerous as the stars of the sky, as the sand on the seashore. He didn’t ask Abraham to do anything, he just told him this. And Abraham took God at his word. He believed. He said “Amen,” and trusted that if God said it, so it will be.

The Lord “credited” that faith to him “as righteousness.” Paul in Romans quoted that statement and expanded on it: “Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justified the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Ro. 4:4,5). Abraham didn’t “earn” the declaration of being righteous by what he did; God “credited” it to him, he simply declared it to him by virtue of his faith, his trust in God’s promise. Paul drew this conclusion: “For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (Ro. 3:28). As Luther wrote it: “By faith *alone*.”

There are many Christian churches that deny “by faith alone” and say that a person gets saved and is considered righteous before God by both faith and works. They insist that a person still needs to do something to make their salvation complete before God. But our works and actions have nothing to do with being saved and counted as righteous. It has everything to do with God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and his work. (Jesus, you see, was the great descendant of Abraham and fulfiller of God’s promise.) Jesus’ holiness, not ours, earned righteousness. His suffering and death, not ours, paid for our sins. Jesus rose and crushed death and the devil. All we do is believe, we say, “Yes, it’s true; Jesus died for my sins.” All we do is trust in Jesus as our Savior.

That’s why we say that we are righteous by faith alone, because faith is mere trust in Jesus who did the work for us. To be sure, we are saved and justified by faith alone, but faith is never alone. The epistle of James points out clearly that “faith without deeds is dead” (Jas. 2:26) and saving faith in Christ is going to show itself with good works, loving God back and loving our neighbor as ourselves. But knowing our weaknesses and our sins—just as Abraham knew his—we know we can’t rely on ourselves. Rely on the Lord alone! Don’t be afraid, little flock, the Lord is still your shield, and your very great reward. Amen.