

# GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES

by Steve Zeisler

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Thursday night I had the wonderful privilege of attending a seminar in which the panelists were a Jew, a Moslem, and a Mormon each of whom had come to Christ. They were presenting their perspectives on the journey that had led them to saving faith in Jesus. It was a magnificent time with three very different people, all of them winsome Christians with an important word to share.

Tuvya Zaretsky, the panelist who spoke of being raised as a Jew, mentioned that Judaism views Abraham as its fountainhead. He is the origin of the faith of the Jews. Islam also finds its roots in the life and experience of Abraham, and even Mormonism with its emphasis of Abraham, and even Mormonism with its emphasis on the priesthood of Melchizedek testifies to his importance. With this breadth of testimony to the importance of Abraham's influence we will benefit greatly from considering what the New Testament teaches about him.

We'll see in Romans 4 that there is no one who will ever know God without following the example of Abraham. Abraham is indeed a transcendent figure who stands astride human history in a unique way. He traveled the journey of faith that all believers since him have taken.

In the last half of chapter 3 Paul concludes an analysis in which he finds everybody guilty before God. The self-identified rebel, the moralist, and the legalist are all guilty. Everybody stands, as he says, with mouths shut, having to listen to God's answer to the human predicament. His solution is a surprising gift which is offered apart from any contribution by those who will receive it. He has made his righteousness known and available to us because Jesus died on the cross as the payment for our sins. That message does away with all boasting. We must refuse to be impressed with our contribution in any sense, but having received the opportunity to experience the righteousness of God, we must do so by faith and with appreciation for the giver of the gift.

## WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO BE ABRAHAM?

Now the questions that Paul asks us at the very end of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4 are these:

Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?

The term "the Law" is used in different ways throughout the New Testament (even within Paul's writings) and the Old Testament. What Paul is using it to mean here is the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. Do we nullify the Law by speaking of this righteousness of God that comes from an oblique angle and intersects human history in a way we didn't expect? The answer is no, we do not nullify the Law, because Abraham's story is there in Genesis. What Abraham teaches us is that from the beginning the righteousness of God has always been apprehended by faith.

Notice how Paul phrases the question posed in chapters four, verse one. He does not ask, what do we learn about faith by studying the life of Abraham? He asks, what did Abraham discover? This is an invitation to walk in Abraham's shoes, to go back into his world and learn what the righteousness of God is like the way he discovered it. What would it have been like to be Abraham, to be made aware of the righteousness of God reckoned as a gift? (Paul is also going to let David chime in a moment. And when David speaks we should put ourselves in his shoes and ask again, not what does David teach us, but what would it have been like to be David learning about the righteousness of God that had been imputed to him?) Verses 2-8:

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, just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven,  
And whose sins have been covered.  
Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."

We are not learning systematic theology in considering Abraham's life. You can go to a seminary or open a theology book and find propositions about God, man, salvation, and history; and each of the propositions can be undergirded by the texts of Scripture that support it. But that is not how we encounter the righteousness of God here. We will hear of Abraham's experience, the way he spoke with the living God and what it meant to him. We will hear David cry from his heart in a psalm, "Oh, the blessedness of the one whose lawless deeds have been forgiven!" We're going to learn of the Lord the way they learned, by knowing him, by experiencing the righteousness of God given to them.

## **THE FRIEND OF GOD**

In verse 17 and following Abraham's story is told in a personal way. But there are some things Paul wants to clear up about him before we get to hear his story. The first one is this: Was Abraham justified by the things he did? Now, justification is one of the terms that describe what it means to have the righteousness of God imputed to you. When we are justified, we are declared innocent; there is no longer any charge held against us anymore. The court has set us free. Was Abraham set free or justified because he was so worthwhile himself? Paul says no; if he had worked for wages he would have earned what he got, but Scripture does not say that as a workman he was owed his wages. What it says is that righteousness was reckoned to him as a gift when he believed God.

This phrase comes from a conversation recorded in Genesis 15. Abraham said, "I've been tramping around the promised land for you. I've left my home and my family, I've gone where I've been told. I'm supposed to become a great nation. Well, the heir of my household is Eliezer of Damascus. My wife and I have no children. Is this your plan?" The Lord took him out under the stars and said, "From your own body will come your son. And you will have as many heirs as that numberless multitude of stars in the heavens." Abraham answered, "I am convinced that what you say, you will do, however difficult and unlikely it seems to me. I believe you." And the Lord imputed righteousness to him at that moment.

Before any of the things that God said would happen happened, Abraham became a changed man; he became right before God. He was free of the record of his sins (and Abraham was unquestionably a sinner). James makes a wonderful commentary on this verse. James 2:23 says, "...and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness....'" James quotes Genesis 15:6 just as Paul does. James goes on to add, "...and he was called the friend of God." From the moment Abraham believed from his heart what God said, he became the friend of God. Romans 5:1 will begin further explanation of the nature of this transformation: "Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God...." Abraham had peace with God. He and God were united in the intimacy of friendship. He made his way through life never again worrying about distance between himself and God; never approaching God hesitantly, uncertain of his relationship with him.

That is the offer that is made to us: to hear God speak and believe him; and having believed him, we have become the friend of God as well. We are changed; we have peace with God. God offers us his righteousness. Righteousness is an extraordinary term. You could spend the rest of your life trying to understand what it means, it includes such a vastness of experience. It is becoming everything that we ought to be, everything we long to be, everything we were made to be. We experience life as fully valuable to God and to ourselves. What an adventure it is to be a righteous person! What an awesome gift! And one of the elements, at least, is the friendship or the companionship of God-peace with him; never again uncertain of his approval, his delight in us, his nearness to us.

A couple attending our church are planning to be married soon. They were once just part of a circle of friends that enjoyed fellowship, learning and fun. But over time these two drew closer and closer and eventually they each spoke and received a marvelous announcement, "I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you." And from that moment everything was different. They haven't even begun to live life together yet; only the declaration of love has been made. But hearing and believing are enough to utterly change a person, they will never again think of themselves in the same way.

That is very much like what God said to Abraham: "I love you. I am going to make you a great nation. I promise to give you what you long to have." And Abraham believed him, and from that time on he was a friend of God.

## **ON, THE BLESSEDNESS OF BEING FORGIVEN!**

Paul is going to let David testify, too. David had a somewhat different experience. Verse 6:

"...David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works."

Paul quotes Psalm 32:1-2:

"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven,  
And whose sins have been covered.  
Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."

The verses that follow in Psalm 32 continue:

"When I kept silent,  
my bones wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.  
For day and night  
your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was sapped  
as in the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you  
and did not cover up my iniquity.  
I said, 'I will confess  
my transgressions to the LORD'-  
and you forgave  
the guilt of my sin."

For David, righteousness was this experience: "Oh, the extraordinary blessedness [that is how verse 1 should be translated] of the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account, whose lawless deeds have been forgiven!" Abraham was made a promise by God that he believed, and he became the friend of God. David came to God with sins that were melting his bones, with depression and heartsickness and self-hatred and shame for what he had done and for the hurt he had inflicted on other people. When righteousness was given him, he especially appreciated that he was forgiven, that his lawless deeds had been covered and would be remembered no more, that he could walk into the presence of God cleansed.

So as we embark on this journey of discovery and try to walk first in Abraham's shoes for awhile and then in David's, what we see is that they discover not contrary things but different elements of the experience of becoming righteous, and we see what it means to them. And we ourselves have words of thanks, words of appreciation to say to the Lord. The gift of his righteousness may elicit a different song from each of us.

## **THE FATHER OF ALL WHO BELIEVE**

There is a second discourse that the apostle enters into here because he wants prevent any misunderstanding. Verses 9 through 16 have to do with circumcision and the Law, a special concern of the Jews. The Jews know Abraham as their father, and claim unique status as his descendants through Isaac and Jacob. The rite of circumcision that they share with the patriarchs distinguishes them from all the others. But righteousness is unrelated to circumcision. Abraham was not a Jew in that sense. God's righteousness mentioned in Genesis 15 was given to Abraham before he was circumcised. In Galatians 3 Paul argues that four hundred thirty years before the Law was given to Moses, Abraham was given this righteousness as a gift. Abraham is the father of all who believe, not just the father of the Jews. Abraham's faith and his experience are available to everybody. Verses 9-12:

Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.

So if you came into the world a Jew and are circumcised as a Jew, you are still required to believe what Abraham believed in order for righteousness to be yours. If you came into the world as a Gentile, you are also required to believe what Abraham believed in order to be made right with God. Either Jew or Gentile, what you need is to experience the righteousness of God given as a gift.

## **GRACE AND FAITH**

Then he goes on to say that this gift of righteousness is not through the Law. Verses 13-16:

For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace....

That is a very important phrase; grace and faith correspond. If it is a gracious gift, it must be received by faith. If the wage is earned, as described earlier; then it is no longer a gift.

...in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all....

The United States Constitution invented the United States of America. The colonies didn't become states until the Constitution made them states. States have different laws in this country. And municipalities within states have different laws; for example, zoning laws that vary from region to region. If you live in a rural area you might have traffic laws that allow for animals to cross the road. If you live in an urban region you might have traffic laws that apply only to buses. Legal differences may exist from one municipality to another, but no municipality can take away the rights of a US citizen because the federal government clearly enumerates rights that supersede local laws. As a citizen you may claim rights of free speech, a free press, and the free exercise of religion. Because these rights were codified in the constitution from the beginning, no subsequent law-making body can deny them.

That is what Paul is saying about Abraham here. Many nations with different histories will look back to the influence of Abraham. But the faith of Abraham was first. It predates every other distinction made among us, and if we have the faith of our father Abraham, God is pleased and we are give the gift of righteousness.

## **WHAT ABRAHAM BELIEVED**

Verse 17 begins the section where Paul tells us Abraham's story in more detail. It explains chapter 17 of Genesis, where God is speaking to Abraham again, changing his name. This man's name was a long-standing irony. His original name, Abram, meant Exalted Father. He spent much of his life unable to have children, walking around being called Exalted Father. (He was eighty-six when Ishamel was conceived through an act of disobedience). At one hundred years of age God changed his name and made it worse: from Abram to Abraham, Father of a Multitude. Verse 17 says:

...(as it is written, "A father of many nations have I made you") in the sight of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.

Essentially what it means to believe God is to say this and in your heart mean this about God: that He is the one who has the power and the authority to give life where there has been death, sorrow and loss, and to call into being that which never existed before.

Verses 18-20:

In hope against hope he believed, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, "So shall your descendants be." And without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God....

The story at this point has a ninety-year old woman who is well past menopause and a one-hundred-year old man who is impotent. The patriarchs aged much more slowly than we do, but still by the time they got to ninety or one hundred they were very old, and the circumstances described are not surprising. And it says that Abraham looked at the situation, at his body (at the member of his body that was circumcised, which God had given him as a sign and seal of the promise). And he considered Sarah's womb. It says he was hoping against hope, looking honestly at the facts. He was anchoring himself in the future even though all the evidence clearly contradicted hope.

## **GROWING STRONG IN FAITH**

This is not denial. Faith isn't being described here as some kind of Pollyanna foolishness that refuses to deal with the real world. He didn't float off to a mountain top and escape the difficulty. It says he didn't waver in his faith-but he struggled. He was never tempted to believe any other god, but we know he wrestled with God. He was not unrealistic; he struggled as he looked at the facts, and yet he grew in faith. This business of having faith takes time and requires growth. He gave glory to God and his faith grew, and he continued to believe against all evidence that what God said he would do. Verse 21:

...and being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform.

If you want a succinct statement of what the content of faith is, it is the last half of verse 17: If we are to have faith we must believe that our God is the one who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which did not exist. If you want a succinct commentary on what the experience of faith is, it's verse 21: being fully assured that what God has promised, he is able to perform. When I know a promise of God, I am convinced that he can and will do what he said, and I'll bet my life on it.

## **FOLLOWING ABRAHAM'S EXAMPLE**

Verses 22-24:

Therefore also it was reckoned to him as righteousness. 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....

This is the God who calls into being that which is not and gives life from the dead. Our responsibility is to believe in the specific truth that our Lord laid down his life and that he was then raised from the dead. He is the one in whom we place our faith as Abraham placed his faith in the promise of God as he stood under the stars. As we place our faith in Christ, we are to conform ourselves in our experience to Abraham's example.

Verse 25:

...He who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

God accepted the sacrifice and raised Jesus up, giving him life again. The acceptable sacrifice of Christ for our transgressions makes possible the gift of righteousness. But what will our journey of discovery be? Abraham believed God and found himself the friend of God, so that in all the rest of his wanderings and his conversations, never once was he without the companionship of God. David was supremely grateful for the forgiveness of his sins. It is valuable for us to articulate, if only to ourselves, what we appreciate most about the gift we have received.

## **SPECIFIC FAITH**

I want to close by asking you to picture Sarah and Abraham in your imagination. In Genesis 18 angels came to tell this old couple that the time had come for their son to be born. Genesis 18:9-12:

"Where is your wife, Sarah?" [the angels] asked [Abraham].

"There, in the tent," he said.

Then the LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

Ishmael had been born about fourteen years earlier. At some time since then Abraham had ceased having sexual intercourse. It had been a long time since he and Sarah were intimate as husband and wife. Now Sarah is laughing to herself, "I'm worn out. He's old. And these men are telling us that the two of us will become lovers again ("have this pleasure") and have a child." Yet, sometime in the course of the next three months Abraham and his wife would draw near to one another again trusting in God and perhaps laughing with appreciation instead of incredulity believing that they would have a son; a son who would be named Isaac which means laughter. They invited each other into intimacy and became the parents of the child who was promised to them.

Faith for us is going to be exercised in some way as concrete as that-specific application of a promise of God to defeat a ruinous habit, or tenacious clinging to God's loving approval when we feel shame or self-hatred. In some area of our lives God will call us to trust him amidst difficulty. And we will have to say, "Yes, I believe you," and act on it just as Abraham and Sarah did. We will decide to be different from the way we have always been because we are now the friend of God, because we now have peace with God, because we have been given righteousness.

I'll leave you with the mental image of two old people holding one another, laughing together in a tent in Canaan and believing the word of the Lord that said, "By this time next year you'll be parents." They are acting on the promises of God, and we are called to imitate such faith.

Romans 3:31-4:25  
Seventh Message  
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