

Faith Alone

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[0 : 0 0] We have challenges as a church, as every church does, and I praise God that that is not one of our challenges.! It's a great blessing and privilege to be a church with young, crying children. We're thankful. So we give God all the praise for that.

He grows his church by bringing folks from outside. He grows his church by giving us children inside. We're grateful for all of those. Good morning.

Good morning.

[illegible]

First, it prepares us to go back into our series in the book of Romans. Romans chapter 4 will be about Abraham. And second, it allows us to ask this question, what does it look like to follow God in faith?

[1 : 43] The last several weeks, we've sort of had this side quest. In chapters 13 and 14, we've been in the story of Lot. You'll remember that Lot is captured. Abraham rescues him.

Has a great victory over multiple kings. And then last week, we saw Abraham comes back. He gives all praise and honor and glory to God. Now we're on the other side of the Lot quest, although we will come back to Lot next month.

This week, though, we're back to the main plot. The main plot of Abraham and Sarai and what is going to happen with the promises that God has made to them. So our question this week is this.

What is the foundation of our relationship with God? What is the foundation of our relationship with God?

I invite you to turn with me to Genesis chapter 15. You can turn in your Bible. You can turn on your phone. You can turn in your worship guide. No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's word.

[2 : 49] And Proverbs chapter 30, verse 5 tells us, every word of God proves true. He is a shield to those who take refuge in him.

And so that's why we read now Genesis chapter 15. After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. Fear not, Abram.

I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great. But Abram said, O Lord God, what will you give me? For I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus.

And Abram said, Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him.

This man shall not be your heir. Your very own son shall be your heir. And he brought him outside and said, Look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them.

[3 : 53] Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be. And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Verse 7. And he said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess. But he said, O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?

He said to him, Bring me a heifer, three years old, a female goat, three years old, a ram, three years old, a turtle dove, and a young pigeon.

And he brought him all of these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

Verse 12. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram, Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for 400 years.

[5 : 12] But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace.

You shall be buried in a good old age, and they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.

Verse 17. When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.

I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you for this church that you have planted and established here before it was ever known to any of us.

[6 : 27] We thank you even more than that for your word that you have given to us to show us the way to walk in this world and even more to show us the great salvation that you have for us in Jesus Christ.

We ask that you would send your spirit now to help us do what we can't do on our own, that we would be able to understand your word, that you would speak clearly to us in it, that we would see you and we would see Christ.

We ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. I know of a man who has four children, and at one point, when his kids were young, they had this ritual at bedtime when he would ask his kids this question, do you know that mommy and daddy love you?

It was an easy question, and so they would just say, yes, we know that mommy and daddy love us. And then he would follow it up with a second question, do you know why mommy and daddy love you?

And they would go through this set of answers each time. The kids would say, do you love us because we're good at baseball? No. Do you love me because I caught such a big fish?

[7 : 47] No. Do you love me because I'm so obedient? No. Maybe they're not. Do you love me because I got good grades?

No. No. I'll tell you their final answer at the end. The real question they're asking, though, is this. What is the basis of our relationship?

What is the foundation? Is it your baseball? Is it your grades? Is it your behavior? What is really at the bottom of all of it? Genesis 15 presents that same question to us.

What is the foundation of our relationship with God? Why is it that God loves us? It's going to take us a little bit to get to the end, the bottom of that answer, but I want you to jump in with me at the very beginning of chapter 15.

You have to remember that we're coming off of chapter 14. And what happens at the very end of that chapter? Abraham refuses to receive the spoils offered to him by the king of Sodom.

[8 : 55] The king of Sodom offers all of the spoils. Abraham rejects all of the spoils. And that helps us understand what's going on in verse 1.

God comes to him and says, Fear not, Abram. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great. Which raises the question for us, why is God saying this to Abram?

And why is he saying it now? Of all the times in the narrative, why is it this specific point that God decides to tell him, By the way, don't be afraid.

I'm your shield. Your very great reward. Well, it's very simple. Abraham's just sacrificed for God's glory. He's given up all these things that were his right.

Of course he's entitled to take the spoils from rescuing Sodom, right? And so God's saying, Look, I see you. I've seen the sacrifices that you've made.

[9 : 58] I will take care of you. Yes, you gave up everything from Sodom. But, and, your reward shall be very great.

Don't worry. You gave it up. I will take care of you. Last week I told you about a family trip that I went on in the year 2000 to Easley, South Carolina.

August of 2000 when I turned 11. And you'll remember we went to help an older relative with her house and her yard. And when we did that trip, that trip cost my family something.

But my dad took off a couple days of work, which we know is precious, right? Cost my parents the money for a hotel and gas.

And we did it. My parents were happy to do that. We got back home. And within a couple of days, a few days, out of the blue, my dad received an award at work.

[11 : 04] And for that award, he was given two days of vacation and \$200. The exact amount, almost to the penny, of the hotel and the gas.

And my mom said, God just handed it right back. Christian, whatever you give, God gives it all back.

It may not, it probably won't be as direct or immediate as it was for my parents in that story. And it may not be in this life. But he will restore whatever you give.

Abraham, you've sacrificed, you've rescued Lot, you gave up the plunder, you gave up the glory.

Don't worry. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great. Have you lost things for following Jesus?

[12 : 22] Have you given things up? Have you sacrificed something?

Fear not. God is your shield. Your reward shall be very great. What does it look like to follow God in faith?

Whatever we give, we receive so much more. If not in this life, then in the life to come.

It turns out, Jesus says something like this too. Mark chapter 10, truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the gospel who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecutions and in the age to come eternal.

life. Never underestimate God's generosity. The Lord loves his people.

- [13 : 49] Christian, he loves you. Your sacrifice is not in vain. There's a foundational question that we have to get straight for the rest of life.
- If you're a Christian, this question matters more than almost any other. Do you believe that God will care for you or do you not?
- Do you believe that God means it and he'll do it and he'll do it when he says, I will never leave you nor forsake you? Do you believe Jesus when he says, not a hair can fall from your head without your father in heaven knowing?
- And underneath that, there's an even more important question, which is this. did Jesus rise from the dead or did he not?
- Romans chapter 8, verse 32. He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?
- [15 : 17] Christian, whatever you have lost, do not fear.
- God is your shield. Your reward shall be very great. All that is good and true.
- we've been on a mountaintop. It's now time to go back straight down to sea level in verse 2. Abraham says, okay God, that is really cool.
- I'm so glad you're going to be my shield and my very great reward but guess what? That doesn't really matter and it doesn't matter because I don't have a child. Who cares that you can replace all this spoil?
- I have no one to give it to. I don't have a kid. This is verse 3 and I don't have a kid because you haven't given me one and so I have this problem.
- [16 : 22] Any spoil you give me it's going to go to Eliezer of Damascus and he's referring most likely to a servant here. Hey, there's this person in my household. Sarai and I have no child.
- What does it matter? This takes us back to the very beginning of the Abram story. The very first thing we learn about Sarai in chapter 11 is this.
- She is not able to have children. The promise in chapter 12 is that despite that they're going to be a great nation, right? And yet we find out also chapter 12, Abraham is 74 years old and none of it has come true.
- And so Abraham says, so what? So what that you're my shield? I don't have what matters most.
- And so God tells him here in verse 4, you don't have it now but you will. Not only will you have your very own son, verse 4, verse 5, number the stars.
- [17 : 33] And you can number the stars, you will know the size of your offspring. And so we get to verse 6, one of the most shocking and important verses in the entire Bible.
- And it is shocking for two reasons. First, I don't want you to lose here how staggering it is the difference between the reality and the promise.
- The reality is that Sarai cannot have children and that Abraham is very old and they actually don't have any children right now. The promise is that they are going to have more children than the stars in the sky.
- God tells this staggering thing to Abraham and what does he say? Oh, okay. And he believed the Lord.
- Why is Abraham our great father in the faith? Because God comes and gives him something that seems completely impossible, right? And Abraham says, yes, I believe that.
- [18 : 40] I'll take that, I'll live on that, I'll act on that. Okay, that's shocking. What's even more shocking is the second half of the verse. And he counted it to him as righteousness.

Now to understand how shocking this is and to understand what he means by righteousness, we have to go back in the story all the way back to Genesis chapter 3. Remember, Adam and Eve rebel against God in the garden and they take part of the forbidden fruit.

In that moment, Adam and Eve lose their righteousness. They lose their standing with God, their relationship with him. That lack of righteousness as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve is passed on to us.

Okay? We also don't have right standing with God. And we don't have that because we daily do not love him, serve him, obey him, worship him as we should.

And so the whole plot of the Bible turns on this question. How will righteousness be restored? One man puts the story of the Old Testament in this way.

[19 : 49] How will God's people return to God's presence in God's land? How will God's people return to God's presence in God's land?

Which is a way of asking how is righteousness going to be restored in light of humanity's rebellion against God? What's going to happen now that we live east of Eden?

And verse 6 says, you know, it's actually going to be really simple. Believe. Believe that God's promises are true.

that is part of the answer. I've told you before about the English writer Samuel Johnson from the 18th century who says people need to be reminded more often than they need to be instructed.

And so I'm going to remind you of some things this morning. You live in a world full of voices that are not telling you about various things you need to do to be loved and lovable and okay.

[21 : 09] Some of those voices tell you that you need to take Botox to look young enough. Some of them are telling you that you need to wear the right thing and go to the right school and be powerful enough.

Some of those voices tell you you need to be funny enough, athletic enough, have enough friends, hold the right beliefs for your social group. hope. Genesis chapter 15 says something radically different.

What do you need to do to be okay, to be right with God? Believe. That is what God offers.

Christianity is the only way to get off the treadmill of justifying your right to exist.

Christianity is the only way to get off the treadmill of justifying your right to exist. I'm going to ask you to go back with me to page three of your worship guide. Jim already read this for us.

[22 : 16] He's talking about Abraham and his belief. Verse 7, blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.

How are your lawless deeds going to be forgiven? Believe. How are your sins going to be covered?

Believe. How will the Lord not count against you your sin? Believe. Of course, belief, our belief, is not the foundation of a relationship with God.

Your faith is not some sort of work that justifies you. And so we have to keep digging even more into this passage. God's promise is believing them part of the answer.

God calls us to believe them. He credits that to us as righteousness. But we also have in this passage God's sacrifice. Verse 8, Abraham believes and he needs assurance.

[23 : 36] Verse 7, God's promised him to land. Land and descendants are part of what's happening here. Verse 8, Abraham believes, God credits that belief to him as righteousness and as a feeble, falling, frail person.

He is looking for reassurance. What happens here in verses 9 through 17, there's a lot going on, so I'm going to summarize it for you very briefly. Abraham takes five animals.

Three of those animals get cut in half. Those halves are placed on opposite sides of basically a path that someone can walk through.

So I want you to imagine a path or a road and on each side there's the halves of the animals. So on one side you've got heads and the other side you've got tails. I'm assuming that's how the animals were cut.

And this sounds like a strange practice to most of you. Maybe some of you do this from time to time. The reason is this. In the ancient Near East, if you were making a covenant, an agreement, you would chop animals in half like this and then both parties would walk down the path.

[24 : 53] And you were acting out the consequences of breaking your agreement. So you were essentially saying, if I don't keep my word on this, may I be like these animals.

If I break my promise, may I be cut in half. Okay, so that's what's happening. There's a covenant being made between Abraham and God, animals on each side of the path to represent the curse for anyone who breaks the agreement.

Verse 17, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed, between these pieces. So the fire pot and the torch represent God.

God is passing through the animals and saying, if I don't keep my word, if I break the covenant, may I become like these animals. Now, did you notice where Abraham walks between the animals?

No, you didn't because he doesn't. Abraham is left off the hook.

[26 : 14] That's the wrinkle here is that God upholds both sides. God breaks it. God is cut in half.

If Abraham breaks it, God is cut in half. Of course, that is exactly what happens, right?

the story of Israel and of mankind is that they continue to fail to worship, love, serve, and obey God. God upholds his side of the agreement.

Mankind does not. But who does the punishment fall on? It doesn't fall on man. It falls on God.

Because he is the only one who walked between the halves. Mind blowing.

[27 : 15] At this point, Abraham is probably shaking with how overwhelmed he is. We don't get cut in half.

God does. I invite you to turn with me to the back of your worship guide. You'll see this. In Jesus, God himself bears the punishment of being almost literally torn apart by the whips, the thorns, the nails, and the spear for our sin so that he could be faithful to his promise to be our God, that we might be his people through simple faith in him.

What is the foundation of our relationship with God? First of all, it's belief in his promises which he credits to us as righteousness.

Second, it is the sacrifice that God takes upon himself that Jesus dies the death that we deserve for our sins and lives the perfect life that we should have lived. But I want you to dig underneath that even deeper because there is a deeper foundation.

If we say that Christ's death is the foundation ultimately, then we have to say in some ways that Jesus was convincing God to love us. But what does John chapter 3 tell us?

[28 : 37] For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. You notice the sequence?

God loved the world first, sent his son. I told you at the beginning I know a man who has four kids. and when he puts his kids to bed he has a ritual with them and he asks them do you know that mommy and daddy love you?

And they say yes. And then he asks them do you know why mommy and daddy love you? And they go through all the reasons that are not true.

It's not because you bought a big fish. It's not because you're so obedient. You're probably not. It is not because you're good at school. It's not because you're so funny.

They get to the end of the questions and the dad finally says this. We love you because you are our child and that will never change.

[29 : 46] Christian, what is the foundation of your relationship with God? He loves you because you're his child and that will never change.

love. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you for your great love, love beyond what we can comprehend and understand.

We ask that we would turn to you rather than all the other things that offer to make us okay because we know that you and you alone can give us the righteousness that matters. We ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen.