

April 20, 2008

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

The Blessing of Abraham

Galatians 3:6-14

Faith is important – faith is crucial – faith brings us into a relationship with the God who made us – and faith justifies us in His sight. And the Bible says that without faith it is impossible to please God. And we looked last week at the result of faith and found that faith results in righteousness. *6 Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. Abraham believed – God reckoned.* And we looked at the work of faith and understood that the work of faith is sonship. *7 Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.* That is **the real sons of Abraham are those who have his faith – not just his genes.**

And then we looked at the nature of faith and saw that **faith only works in the dark** That is **faith is hearing God and believing what He says is true, not what our circumstances say or our eyes tell us.** *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* Hebrews 1:1 During an especially trying time in the work of the China Inland Mission, Hudson Taylor, a man who lived on the cutting edge of faith, wrote to his wife, **“We have twenty-five cents—and all the promises of God!”**

Faith is also taking the next step as Oswald Chambers once wrote, **“Trust God and take the next step.”** That is **we show that we are sons of Abraham when we do what God has said to do.** In the Old Testament there are two stories that highlight this aspect of faith so well. The first story is in Numbers 13-14. God had led the nation of Israel out of bondage and was taking them into their inheritance in Canaan. But out of the jaws of certain victory, they managed to snatch defeat. Moses sent twelve men to spy out the land and ten of them came back and said that it was a great place to visit but they really couldn't see themselves living there.

And they told him, *We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there...The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.* Numbers 13:27-28, 32-33 And the following verse says that they cried all night in their tents – and they spent the next 40 years wandering about in circles because they didn't take the next step.

The other story is in Joshua chapter 3, forty years later. Moses is dead, Joshua has been commissioned to lead Israel, and once again they find themselves on the cutting edge of faith. They are supposed to cross the Jordan river without benefit of a bridge and go into Canaan and take on all those guys they were afraid of forty years ago. And once again they were to go in faith. *Joshua said, Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you and that He will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites. Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is passing over before you into the Jordan. Now therefore take twelve men from the tribes of Israel, from each tribe a man. And when the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap.* Joshua 3:10-13

In other words, it would be like standing at the edge of the Puyallup river in full flood and you hear God speak to you and say, 'You've got to cross this river – but I am not going to make a way for you until you step into it.' This is faith – stepping into the river while it is still going strong. Most of us would rather wait until God stops the river or parts the sea – but faith says 'I'll do what God says even if it looks like suicide.' And the ending of this story in Joshua is so different from that one in Numbers because they took the next step. This is what the Bible records: *'...and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water...the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away...and those flowing down toward the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off...and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.'* Joshua 3:15-17 But it didn't happen until they took the next step.

Faith is also dependent upon who God is – not upon who we are or what we can do. The object of faith is God Himself, not what we can do. If we can do it without God – it isn't faith, it's ability. Faith is not faith unless there is something or someone outside of us to have faith in. Furthermore, we can trust Him because He is God – and we are not. If He says it is so – it is so. Too often when God speaks to us to walk a certain way – we look to see if we can do it – if it is really possible. But faith operates in the realm of the impossible – and by definition, that means that we are not capable – we need faith.

Finally we saw that **faith is founded on the word of God.** *“Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.”* Romans 10:17 There is something that happens when God speaks into our hearts through His word – faith rises. D.L. Moody once said, *“I used to pray daily for the Lord to give me faith. Then one day I read Romans 10:17, which says ‘faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.’ So, I began to read my Bible, and faith has been growing ever since.”* There is something too, about the fact that the more we know – the more we trust. In fact I think you could make a case that **your faith in God is in direct proportion to your knowledge of God.** And we know Him through His word – and that word speaking into our lives.

And Paul concludes here by saying, *9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.* That doesn't mean that Abraham is our blessing – not blessed **with** Abraham – but **along with** Abraham. That is, there is a blessing that comes from faith. In verse 14 Paul calls this the blessing of Abraham – **faith brings us into the blessing of Abraham.**

This highlights the point that **there is no salvation by any other means.** We are saved by grace through faith – just like Abraham. Many Christians have the wrong idea that the Old Testament believers were saved by some other means. But from the beginning it has been the same – by faith. Adam lost out in the garden because ultimately he did not believe God and trust Him. God said, 'Eat any tree but that one – because if you eat that one you will die.' And the serpent came along and said, 'Did God really say...?' Unbelief was at the root of the fall and unbelief is at the root of man's rebellion and rejection of God today. Jesus says, *'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life – no one comes to the Father but through Me.'* John 14:6

The truth that there is only one way to God – through His Son, Jesus Christ – is at the heart of most people's rejection of the gospel. We don't want to be tied down to just one way. We like to have options. Options make us happy because options mean that we can do as we please and still make it.

Paul shows us here in this section the meaning of the blessing of Abraham. The first thing we need to understand about this is that when we respond by faith to the gospel – **we become the blessing of God to the nations.** In verse 8, Paul draws from the word to Abraham in Genesis 15: *The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU."* God's intention from the start was to have a people that He could bless and that could in turn bless others. God was not dealing exclusively with the Jews – He intended to justify the Gentiles – everyone not Jewish – by faith, just like He justified the Father of the Jews, Abraham.

This promise is first given to Abraham in chapter 12 of Genesis: *1 Now the Lord said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.* Genesis 12:1-3 When God says that in Abraham all the families (nations) of the earth will be blessed, He was saying that the descendants of Abraham were created for the world – that their mission was to be a blessing to the nations. What greater blessing can there be than to bring the good news of the Gospel to a dying world? To bring good news to the afflicted, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners and proclaim the favorable year of the Lord, as Isaiah wrote?

As sons of Abraham – by faith – we need to understand that we were saved so that we might be a blessing to the nations. This is why a silent Christian is a shame to the cross of Christ. How can we be a blessing to the nations if we don't talk about it? How can we be comfortable in our seats on Sunday mornings if we never talk about Christ to those who need to hear during the week? How can we not aspire to be on the sharp end of spreading the gospel where we live? Some statistics from a survey done in the mid-90's show that:

Ninety-five percent of all Christians have never won a soul to Christ.
Eighty percent of all Christians do not consistently witness for Christ.
Less than two percent are involved in the ministry of evangelism.
Seventy-one percent do not give any money to further the great Commission.

Wilbur Chapman, a famous nineteenth century evangelist once wrote: *If to be a Christian is worthwhile, then the most ordinary interest in those with whom we come in contact would prompt us to speak to them of Christ...If today is the day of salvation, if tomorrow may never come and if life is equally uncertain, how can we eat, drink and be merry when those who live with us, work with us, walk with us and love us are unprepared for eternity because they are unprepared for time?...If I am to stand at the judgment seat of Christ to render an account for the deeds done in the Body, what shall I say to him if my children are missing, if my friends are not saved or if my employer or employee should miss the way because I have been faithless? If I wish to be approved at the last, then let me remember that no intellectual superiority, no eloquence in preaching, no absorption in business, no shrinking temperament or no spirit of timidity can take the place of or be an excuse for my not making an honest, sincere, prayerful effort to win others to Christ.*

We must be engaged in the gospel, because the alternative is dire. There are only two directions to take in this world and if we are not walking by faith we are under the curse. Paul says in verse 10: *10 For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM."* The law of God shows us the very nature and character of God. It is not a laundry list of things to do – it is a description of what walking by faith looks like. And so if your life does not measure up to the law of God – if you are trying to reach God by doing good – and failing – the Bible says that you are under a curse. And the curse is an eternity in hell.

You see, the law of God says you shall and you shall not. And we take that as a command to try and live up to the law – and Paul says that the Bible teaches that if you are trying to be justified by the law then you will be condemned by the law. He says, *11 Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH." 12 However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM."* That is kind of like saying that he who lives by the sword will die by the sword. The people Paul had in mind were putting certain religious duties on a par with faith and saying that we are saved by trusting Christ and working hard and Paul says that if you live by the law you will die by the law.

But the good news is that: *13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us--for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE "-* 2 Corinthians 5:21 says that Christ, who knew no sin, was made sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God. This is how he redeemed us from the curse of the law. Paul knew that all his years of law-keeping did not help him in any way when it came to the final judgment. In Philippians 3:6 he says that according to the law he was blameless – but he didn't have the obedience that comes from faith in Christ – and so he was under the curse. When you think about it, what offense to a Holy and righteous God to hold up our pitiful rags of goodness and barter our virtue for His mercy. Trying to be good enough for God or maintain our own righteousness is to say that we do not need a savior and to reject Christ. Whenever we live so as to gain points with God somehow – we are living under the curse – not by faith.

But the good news is that Christ became a curse for us. O how marvelous! O how wonderful! That the infinite and holy God left His glory in heaven to bear for us the sin and the shame and the curse in order to make us sons of faith – sons of Abraham! *14 in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.* In Christ Jesus – three little words – three powerful words. To live by faith is to be in Christ. To receive the blessing of Abraham we need to be in Christ. And in Christ is where the promise of the Spirit is. So the blessing of Abraham is not a thing – the blessing of Abraham is a person – Christ Jesus Himself.

This goes all the way back to the promise God made to Abraham – the blessing He gave on account of faith. And we will look at this more fully next week but in closing, turn with me to Genesis 15:1. The blessing of Abraham includes a lot of stuff – but the essence of the blessing is found here in this verse: *'After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your [exceeding great] reward.'* What could be a better reward, a better blessing than God Himself? This is the blessing of Abraham – God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit in us to be our life and life supply – to make us sons of Abraham, sons of God, bearing His nature and likeness for His great glory and name.