

The Faith of Abraham

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John 3:1–17

The word that runs through our three readings this morning and connects them is the word “faith.” Trust in the promise of God. “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” “God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

This is bottom-line Christianity. This is the core of what you and I believe and confess as Christians. This is what makes Christianity “Christian.” It’s the chewy nougat center without which Christianity becomes just another religion among religions. This is what sets Christianity apart from the world’s religions and what many people, even those who call themselves Christian, don’t get. God justifies the ungodly. God counts faith in His promise as righteousness. God grants this as an unearned and undeserved gift, completely apart from any work that we do.

Abraham is the pattern and paradigm. He believed God. He took God at His word and trusted Him. Of all the people on earth, God singled out this one man – seventy-five years old, married, and childless. A wealthy man who shared his empire with his nephew Lot. God chose Abraham not because he was pious, religious, decent, upstanding, or anything at all. In fact, the Scriptures never say why God chose Abraham. He simply came to Abraham and told him to pull up his tent pegs, leave his homeland and dwell as a nomad in a land that didn’t belong to him. God promised Abraham that he would be a great nation, even though he and Sarah his wife were childless and he was 75 years old. That his descendent would inherit that land of Canaan as a gift from the Lord. That his name would be great and a blessing to many. And in him and through his Seed all of the families of the earth would be blessed.

This promise came before Abraham did anything at all. Abraham didn’t say a prayer nor did God offer any kind of a deal. He just told Abraham how it would be. And Abraham believed God. He trusted what the Lord had spoken to him. He believed the promise, as crazy and unlikely as it all sounded, that 75 year-old childless man would be the father of a great nation and through his offspring all people on earth would be blessed. Abraham was faith-full, that is,

full of faith. He took God at His word, and God counted that trust of Abraham as righteousness before Him.

This is how an unrighteous sinner stands before a righteous God. Not on the basis of what you do, but on the basis of trust in the promise of God. This is how Israel stood as a nation before God. This is how you and I stand before God. It's the only way we can stand before God, not on the basis of our works under the Law. Not on the basis of our commandment-keeping, our religious works, our piety, our anything. We stand before God justified solely by God's grace alone, it's a gift from Him to us, unearned and undeserved. We stand by faith alone, that is, trust in what God declares by His Word, namely that through the promised Offspring of Abraham who is Jesus the Christ, the blessing has come to the world and specifically to you. And we stand justified before God on the basis of Jesus Christ alone, His life, His righteousness, His saving death and resurrection.

If you take a survey of people around you and ask them what they think Christianity is all about, they will likely speak in terms of works. Stuff we do, or at least are supposed to do. They'll speak in terms of going to church, of giving offerings, of obeying the commandments, of living according to the Bible's teachings, being good, decent, moral. It's not uncommon to hear people summarize the Christian faith and life this way: Live a good life, do good to others, God will forgive the rest.

And that would be the very opposite of what the Christian faith is. If the promise to Abraham and his offspring had come through the law, then there would be no promise, no Israel, no Savior. "For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, there is no transgression."

The law brings wrath. There's no point in our cozying up to the commandments, because they will kill you in the end. The law is death to the sinner, and sinners we all are. That was true of old Father Abraham too. The condition of Sin, the depth of unbelief, the extent of our corruption are so deep and so pervasive that simple religious rehab won't work. We can't be fixed – not with 10 commandments, not with forty days of purposing, not with anything we do. The law, as holy and well-intentioned and good as it is, will only work death in us.

That's how the apostle Paul described it for himself a few chapters later in Romans 7: What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would

not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” 8 But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

The Law always accuses us; it always kills us; it always condemns us. For all the nice things you can say about the Law – that it is holy and righteous and good and just, that it’s good for morals and even builds strong bodies twelve ways, it cannot save a sinner. It only amplifies and magnifies Sin to the point that sin becomes utterly sinful so that we make no mistake that it is only through faith in the Promise that we are justified before God. If we would understand this one point, our churches would become less of the Law factories that they are and more the Gospel sounding boards they are supposed to be.

“But where there is no law, there is no transgression.” Sin ends where the law ends, and “Christ is the end of the law for all who believe.” In other words, sin ends where Christ begins. Christ is the end of the Law, and so Christ is the end of Sin. With Christ, the reign of Sin is ended. And the chains of Death are broken. Sin and Death go together. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God, a gift given out of God’s grace through faith in the Promise, is eternal life in Christ Jesus.

A rabbi named Nicodemus came to Jesus at night for a little rabbi to rabbi conversation. He had heard great things about Jesus, all the miraculous signs that He had done, and had concluded that He was a great teacher come from God because no one could do the signs that Jesus did unless God was with Him. Nicodemus was focused on doing. That’s what his religion was about. Doing the righteousness of God.

Jesus flips the religious tables on him and comes out with a statement that at first hearing sounds like He wasn’t even listening to Nicodemus. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again (or better born from above) he cannot see the kingdom of heaven. The word ἄνωθεν can mean “again” but it usually means “from above.” It’s one of those multi-purpose words that can mean two different things at the same time. Nicodemus understands it in the sense of “again” and wonders “How can a man enter his mother’s womb and be born a second time?” But the birth Jesus was speaking of was a different kind of birth, a spiritual birth: “Unless one is born of water and Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Water and Spirit are creation language. Everything was born of water and Spirit by the Word in the beginning when the Spirit of God hovered over the chaotic waters of the Deep that covered the earth. It is also baptismal language. Unless one is created anew, born from above by the working of the Holy Spirit with the Word in the water of Baptism, one cannot see or enter the kingdom of God. Flesh and blood born of Adam and corrupted by Sin cannot see or enter the kingdom of God. Adam wants nothing to do with the kingdom of God. Adam wants to be god in his own kingdom. Adam must die; Christ must rise.

Of course, this all puzzles Nicodemus greatly, and who can really blame him? He's losing his religion one sentence at a time. He was a teacher of Israel, a respected member of his community. He stood before his congregation every Sabbath and preached the righteousness of God from the Torah of Moses. And yet, as the apostle Paul would write later to the Corinthians, it was as though a veil were pulled over his eyes so that he could read the words but not grasp their meaning. He could quote the Bible and yet missed the message entirely. Occupied with works and doing and commandment keeping, he missed entirely the central theme and focus of the Torah: Abraham believed God and that faith was credited to him as righteousness before God. Faith alone in the Promise alone by God's grace alone. Luther didn't invent this at the Reformation. It was already there with Moses!

This was the whole theme behind Paul's letter to the Romans: that the Torah is not a Torah of works to do the righteousness of God but a Torah of faith that is credited as righteousness before God. The Promise must be believed, trusted, as Abraham trusted God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

We must believe that we have become new creations in Christ, that the old has gone, that the Law with its commandments are fulfilled, that Death has lost its sting. We must believe that we have been born anew from above in the Spirit-ed water of Baptism. We must believe that this Jesus, lifted up on the cross as Moses once lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness is the antidote to the venom of Sin and that looking on Him in faith we will live even though we die.

We must believe that God loves the world in this way: That He sent His only-begotten Son that whoever believes in Him, that is, trusts in the Promise of forgiveness, life, and salvation in His name, has what he believes, namely eternal life. We must believe, take God at His Word, that God did not send His Son to condemn the world, for the world was already

condemned by the Law. Instead, He sent His Son born of a woman, born under the Law to redeem fallen humanity, to save the world by His own dying and rising.

Take God at His Word. Stand in the faith-full shoes of Abraham. Trust the promise of salvation in Jesus. It will be counted to you as righteousness.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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