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Messages From Genesis “Reckoned As Righteous”

I'm continuing this series of messages on the Book of Genesis. We've looked at creation, Adam and Eve and how sin entered into world, and also Noah and the Flood. Last time we left off in chapter 11, where the people on earth wanted to build a tower that reached to the heavens: another example of human pride and our wanting to play God.

Obviously, these are very important events! And yet, in the Biblical narrative, these are only the prelude and preparation for what comes next in Genesis, chapter 12! It's kind of like when you go to a concert, before the main artist comes out to sing or play, usually you have 1 or 2 performers preceding that – often younger musicians trying to get established as stars. Genesis 1-11 is kind of like the preliminary act!

Well, what's the big event in chapter 12? What's there that's so important? Let's take a look. "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. 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. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'" (Genesis 12:1-3).

It's very easy if you're reading through the book of Genesis to read these verses and keep on going, and never appreciate that this is a *huge moment* in the Biblical story. *God makes a promise to Abraham, and sets in motion the salvation of the world!*

What did God say to Abraham? He is to leave his home and go to a land that God will show him (vs. 1). God will make of him a great nation, and bless him and make his name great, so that Abraham can *be* a blessing to others (vs. 2). In him *all* people on earth will be blessed (vs. 3).

Later on, there are some additions to this promise: Genesis 15:5 "He brought (Abram) outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'" God promises Abram descendants as numerous as the stars! The problem with this is that they have no children. It says in Genesis 11:30, "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child." It's pretty hard to have descendants as numerous as the stars if you are infertile! But notice verse 6: "And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." Keep this verse in mind; we'll come back to it later.

There is another addition to God's promise to Abram. "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you and will make you exceedingly numerous.' Then Abram fell on his face, and God said to him, 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations'" (Genesis 17:1-5).

Again, God promises Abraham many descendants. Now he's 99 yrs. old, still with no children!

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In fact, God changes Abram's name to symbolize that he will bear children: from *Abram* (*exalted father*) to (*father of many, or father of a multitude*).

There's more: "I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding, and I will be their God." God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations'" (Genesis 17:6-9). Nations *and kings* will come from Abraham! God will establish an everlasting *covenant* with Abram and his descendants. God will give to them the land in which they were then dwelling (Canaan). *The rest of the Bible is the story of how God keeps these promises to Abraham - in spite of all kinds of obstacles - and how these promises are ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Jesus.*

Let's look more closely at Abraham's life. We are first introduced to him at the end of Genesis, chapter 11. Abram's original home is Ur. Ur is part of modern Iraq, the southeast corner of Iraq, where the Gulf War of 1991 was fought. Abraham migrates with his father Terah and family to Haran. It's there in Haran that Abraham first hears the call of God on his life. God says, "Go! I want you to move, with your family, to a land that I'll show you!" Does Abraham do it? *Yes!* Genesis 12:4 tell us: "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him...". Remember, he was no spring chicken! "Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran" (Genesis 12:4). Most people, 75, 80 years old, aren't thrilled with the idea of moving! But, another way of looking at it can be: You think just because you're 65 or 75 years old that all of the adventure should be out of your life? Maybe not if you are surrendered to God!

Do you think it took faith for Abraham to pick up and move? The 75 years old man says to his wife Sarah, "Honey (or maybe "Old lady"), take the pictures off the wall, get some boxes, we're moving". After she recovers from the shock she says, "Where to?" And Abraham replies, "I dunno, but let's start packing!"

Abraham is a man of faith! He left his home, what was familiar, to set out on a journey God had laid out for him. *Would you or I do that?* Abraham is mentioned in Hebrews, chapter 11, the "Hebrew Hall of Fame", where some of the great heroes of Israel are remembered. His faith plaque begins: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8).

Now many people in the Bible are commended for their faith, but there is something special about Abraham's faith. It goes back to those words in Genesis 15:6, "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness."

Abraham is righteous because of his faith. What does it mean to be righteous? What is righteousness? I recall pulling into a gas station in a small town where I served a church. The station attendant was speaking to me about a neighbor of mine, a man who didn't work, but the

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wife was the bread winner. The gas station owner was perturbed that my neighbor didn't work, He said to me, "My dad was a pretty righteous person and didn't go for that." I somehow got the impression that his father might have been kind of strict, moralistic, maybe even judgmental. We may think of being "righteous" as having these qualities. But "righteous" in the Bible basically means to be *right with God*, and to live right because you've been made right with God. The Bible says Abraham was righteous, right with God, because of his faith!

It's easy to assume that Abraham was righteous because he was a good guy - one of the great patriarchs of the Old Testament (you know, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) – right up there with Moses. Abraham was one of those holy Bible characters that appear larger than life!

But Abraham had his flaws. For instance, note this event in Abraham's life. "Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, 'I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, "This is his wife"; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you and that my life may be spared on your account'" (Genesis 12:10-13. Nice guy, huh! Sarah went ahead and said she was his sister, so Pharaoh took her into his harem. But look what happened: "But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues, because of Sarai, Abram's wife" (Genesis 12:17). As a result, Pharaoh calls Abraham in and says, "What the heck have you done to me! Your God has sent a plague on me because of you! Here's your wife. Take her and get out of here!" So, if being "righteous" means living by high moral standards, how would you grade Abraham on this one? Maybe a D or an F?

Then, do you remember what happened later? God promised Abraham descendants, though they had no children at the time. A number of years pass and still there are no children. So his wife Sarah has a suggestion: "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, 'You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai" (Genesis 16:1-2). Sarah got impatient, and Abraham goes along with her to hurry things along so they could have a son. He gets Hagar pregnant, and this will create all kinds of family turmoil later on.

There are other instances where Abraham is not exactly the moral example you'd want to pass on to your kids or grandkids!

We might ask: Why did God choose someone like Abraham to kick off the whole plan of salvation? Good question! Abraham is basically a nobody. He's a faceless man in a sea of faces. There is nothing to suggest that Abraham was anyone special, but for reasons we can't understand God chose *him* to play a key role in bringing salvation to the whole world. But because Abraham trusted God he was counted as righteous before God, and used by God to bless the world. "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness..." Genesis 15:6.

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Maybe you are wondering by now, “Well, what’s all this have to do with us, with me?” *One of the fundamental questions of life is: How can I, a sinner, be acceptable to a holy God? How can I know that things are OK between me and my Creator?*

I realize that most people today don’t even think about this question. In the U.S. at least, our generation doesn’t have much of a sense of sin, or that anything’s wrong between us and our Creator. A common view is something like this: I’m no worse than anybody else. If I’m a decent person, if I help people out from time to time, if I don’t do anything really, really bad, then I’m OK. I’m on God’s good side, and someday I’ll go to heaven and be with God.

But the Bible presents a radically different point of view. For example, Psalm 143:2 says, “No one living is righteous before you.” Isaiah 64:6 tells us, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” Romans 3:20 instructs us, “Therefore no one will be declared *righteous* in (God’s) sight by observing the law.” In other words, no one is made right with God by trying to keep God’s commandments and living a good life! Did you get that? *No one* is going to be righteous, or right with God, by any good things we do, or by our religion, or trying to keep God’s laws.

But, *we are made right with God by faith – faith in Christ!* “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known...this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:21-22). In the Book of Romans, it goes on to say that Abraham’s example was for us! "And because of Abraham’s faith, God counted him as righteous. And when God counted him as righteous, it wasn’t just for Abraham’s benefit. It was recorded *for our benefit*, too, assuring us that God will also count us as righteous if we believe in him, the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Romans 4:22-24).

Abraham becomes the model, the prototype, of people who live by faith...and who are declared righteous because of faith! That's why the Bible says that those who have faith in God, and trust Christ and follow Him, are the true children of Abraham! His spiritual descendants! "So also Abraham 'believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness'. Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham...those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Galatians 3:6,7, 9).

I have preached many, many sermons on this theme, that we are made right with God, not by any good works we do, but only by faith in Jesus. We can't make ourselves right with God by doing good works, or by being religious or going to church. And yet I think that the common view is if we just live a pretty decent life all will be well with God and us. *And even many of those in the church believe this.*

But all the good stuff we do will never overcome the distance between God and us caused by our sin! Way back there in Genesis 15, in the early history of Israel, God laid out the plan for how we can be counted righteous before our holy Creator. It's faith - trusting God. And more specifically, since God chose to send His Son Jesus into the world as our Savior, we are made right with God *by believing in Jesus and putting our faith in Him!*

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