

Justified Before God.

Text: Gen 15:1-6

Suggested Hymns:

330, 333, 604, 161, 323

1) Abram believed in the Lord

2) The Lord counted it to him for righteousness

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Genesis 15:1-6, ¹ *After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward."* ² *But Abram said, "Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"* ³ *Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!"*

⁴ *And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir."* ⁵ *Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."* ⁶ *And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

During the first and second world wars, homing pigeons were trained to fly at night. Released far out at sea, with the sky overcast and no stars or landmarks to guide, they flew their way unerringly back to the master's loft.

All through the centuries salmon have roved the seas, to return after a given number of years, finding their way back out of the trackless ocean to the river where they were spawned.

Will man, who has roamed the earth at will, ever find his way back, by his own instinct, reason, or strength, to his Maker, to stand justified before God, to find favour in His sight?

One day Jesus paused on the Mount of Olives, He thought of the sorrows awaiting Him and His disciples there, and of the judgement looming for the city that was to cast Him out in blind unbelief and crucify Him. He said in Matthew 23:37, ³⁷ ***“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!***

Yes, there was also a rift in the ranks of His own disciples. Judas was soon to betray Him, and Peter was to reiterate loudly, ***“I do not know the Man!”***¹

Four hundred years before Christ, one of the Greek philosophers, *Socrates*, who had delved deeply into the realm of religious thought, exclaimed: ***“It may be that God can forgive sin, but I do not see how.”*** In its process of reasoning the pagan mind, which does not know Christ, cannot reconcile divine justice with divine mercy.

The incarnation and atoning work of Christ is a mystery which even the angels desire to look into. Bildad, the friend of Job, asked bluntly, ***“How then can man be righteous before God?”***²

David, overwhelmed by his sense of guilt, prayed earnestly, in Psalm 143:2, ***²Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, For in Your sight no one living is righteous.***

Oh, the wonders of God’s providence and mercy! The thief on the cross, by his own confession in just condemnation, received the assurance of Paradise. Paul, who had persecuted the Church of God with every ounce of his energy, became the Church’s greatest missionary. Peter, who three times denied Jesus, was reinstated; and we have the promise in Mark 16:16, ¹⁶ ***He who believes and is baptized will be saved.*** Our theme is ***“Justified Before God.”*** May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Abram Believed In The Lord

Evidences of Faith

When the word of the Lord came to Abram in Ur of the Chaldees, he followed instructions implicitly. He was already 60 years old. It took more than

a spirit of adventure to lead this man of God away from the familiar scenes and comforts and friendships of home.

It took a great and courageous faith, implicit trust in God's promises, a humble and obedient spirit. ***“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.”***³ He had to lay away his aged father at Haran, and at 75 he still had much of the hazardous journey before him, a land unknown, and inhabitants feared.

Yet he continued undaunted, having understood by faith that though as yet he had no son, he was to become a great nation and that in his Seed, that is, in Christ, all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

When strife arose with Lot's herdsmen, it was the deep humility and unselfishness of faith that made it possible for Abraham to say to his nephew, ***“Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren. ⁹ Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, then I will go to the left.”***⁴

When in the battle of the five kings Lot was carried away captive, Abram risked everything to effect a rescue. He hastily armed his trained servants, 318 in number, and by a surprise attack at night confused the enemy, pursuing him some forty miles, all the way from Dan to Damascus, freeing all the captives and recovering all the loot.

On his return, Melchizedek, the priest, met him and ministered to him and said, ***“And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.” And he gave him a tithe of all.***⁵ But for himself he kept not so much as a thread or a sandal strap, lest the king of Sodom would say, ***“I have made Abram rich.”***

If we would give any evidences of our faith in this sin-troubled world, we would do well to make sure that we are the spiritual children of Abram, implicitly trusting God's Word, taking up our cross and following Christ, never losing sight of the fact that in Him all the nations of the earth are blessed.

We would do well to apply our religious beliefs and convictions practically, giving proof of our faith in God by our humility, unselfishness, brotherly love, in honour preferring one another, rising on occasion to those heights of courage, heroic sacrifice, and cheerful giving to the glory of God, the advancement of His Church, and the welfare of our neighbour.

To match our lives against the stars of Hollywood, or against the athletes, or successful people in business today, would be futile, but to match and attune our heart attitude to the faith life of Abraham has the promise of blessing. As St. Paul urges in 2 Corinthians 13:5, ⁵ *Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.*

Renewed Assurances

After these things our text says, *the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”*

There was some danger, perhaps, that the aggressor kings, who so soon after victory had been deprived of the spoils of war, might rally and come back to wreak vengeance on the servant of the Lord.

There was always the danger that warlike, greedy neighbours might envy him his prosperity or that they might seek to introduce their heathen idolatry and immorality into his household.

But in all these dangers he was to be both happy and safe, as safe as God Himself could make him; for the Lord called him by name and said, *“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield.”* Ancient shields covered the warrior from head to foot. So the Lord promised in effect: *“I am with you, I stand guard over you, I am your Protector and your sure Defence against all the fiery darts of the wicked.”*

Are not the mercies and the assurances of God new every morning? Does not the promise of God, *“I am your Shield,”* stand unshaken and unlimited for every believer every day? Is this not a most beautiful and comforting thought to take with you on your journey of life? It certainly is!

Life has been called a great adventure. But it is more than that. It is a great responsibility, an opportunity that comes only once. And when it is lived, it cannot be lived over again.

For this reason we pray with our children and for ourselves, as we sang before:“

Early let us seek Thy favour,
Early let us do Thy will;
Blessèd Lord and only Saviour,
With Thy love our bosoms fill.

Child-like faith in the renewed and multiplied assurances of God, implicit trust in His promise to be our Shield, will surely help us to stand on our feet, morally and spiritually, when we must make those momentous decisions between right and wrong which may lead to either heaven or hell.

Not that we can by our own reason, determination, or strength avoid all the pitfalls along life’s way and defeat the old evil Foe in life’s long-drawn battle. Peter tried that once and failed. But we can effectually and fervently pray: *Holy Spirit help us, Daily by Thy might, What is wrong to conquer And to choose the right!*⁷

As Luther put it: “*A mighty Fortress is our God, A trusty Shield and Weapon.*” In the midst of danger, we may confidently say with the Psalmist, in Psalm 27:1, ***The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?***

Victory over Doubt

In speaking of the trials of Abraham, we read in the New Testament, in Romans 4:20–21, ***He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God,*** ²¹ ***and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.*** Things had taken a most discouraging turn for Abram. They looked so hopeless. He was getting older every day, and Sarah, though still beautiful, was barren.

Therefore, when God said to him, ***I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward,***” he answered mournfully, ***“Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”*** ... ***“Look, You***

have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!” In this simple way, Abram brought his troubles to the Lord. There was nothing in the world that God could give him, in addition to what he already had, that he desired more than a child of his own, an heir, and the Heir of promise.

So he presented his cause to the Lord with all boldness and confidence, as dear children ask their dear father.

The same privilege is ours-today. We have the divine injunctions - *“Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.”*⁸ *“Cast all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.”*⁹ *“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”*¹⁰

And we read in Numbers 23:19, *“God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?”* However tangled our life may be, God can untangle it. However rough our way, He can make it smooth. However vexing our problems and difficult our petitions, He can answer them all.

In answer to his humble plea, Abram received a definite answer. Not a servant born in his house, but a son of his own should be his heir. And the Lord led him forth into the stillness of the night and said, *“Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.”* And He said to him, *“So shall your descendants be.”*

What an exalted, overpowering prospect for Abram, whose name was soon to be changed to Abraham, the father of many nations! What a reward of faith, a name immortal, not only because of the multitude of his descendants according to the flesh, but as the forebear of the promised Messiah and the father of the faithful to the end of time.

And he believed in the LORD” our text says simply. He gained the victory over doubt. Jesus says in John 8:56, *Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.*

2. The Lord Counted It to Him for Righteousness

Justified by Faith

Abram was rich in good works, yet he was not justified by them. He was honoured by men, even by kings, because of his magnificent and heroic deeds,

but these were not placed into the scale at all. They were not so much as mentioned, in the weighty matter of final and eternal justification before God.

Justification is the judicial act of God by which sinful man's relation to Him is completely reversed. Reconciled by the atoning sacrifice of His own Son, our Substitute, and not by any merit or worthiness in the individual, God, the supreme and just Judge, pronounces sinners righteous. This righteousness is freely offered to all people in the Gospel, and it is apprehended and assimilated and becomes the priceless possession of every penitent sinner by grace through faith in Christ.

In Holy Baptism it is not the act, nor the water, nor the spoken word only, which accomplishes regeneration, but faith which trusts the Word of God in the water.

In Holy Communion it is not the eating and drinking, nor the external elements, nor the words of institution only, that assures life and salvation, but faith in the words of Jesus, *“Given and shed for you for the remission of sins.”*

So the act of faith in itself, the strength of faith and the certainty of faith, is not the pearl of great price; it is merely the setting which by the grace of God holds the pearl. Faith is not the Rock of Ages; it is the strong arm that encircles the Rock. It is not the Christ upon the Cross; faith is the hand that clings to Him.

All believers, now and to the end of time, must be justified before God in the same way that Abram was. *And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.* There is no other way. That was one of our Saviour's last messages to His disciples, given shortly before He knelt in the Garden, crushed beneath the weight of this world's sin, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”*¹¹

We read in Acts 13:39,³⁹ *and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.* And in Romans 6:23,²³ *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

An entire chapter of the Bible (Rom. 4) and more, is devoted to a restudy of this grand and vital truth so clearly revealed 3,800 years ago to Abram (Gen. 15).

A passenger aboard ship became exceedingly alarmed when he saw a funnel-shaped cloud on the horizon moving forward with great speed. Clutching an officer by the arm, he asked with blanched face and trembling lips, “*Do you think we shall be able to weather it?*” “*Weather what?*” “*That approaching hurricane.*” “*Sir,*” said the old man of the sea, “*you need not be alarmed; that storm will never touch us; it is past already.*”

The storm of divine wrath over sin is past already. It broke long over Calvary. All its fierce lightnings were centred in the Saviour’s heart, which was seared and broken for the life of the world, for your salvation and mine.¹²

The Universal Need

Abram was in need of a Saviour. He was surrounded by idolatry, selfishness, and sin in Ur of the Chaldees. Dishonesty, envy, warfare, greed and hate, disrespect for God and disregard for God’s laws, were much in evidence through the years, all the way from Haran to Egypt and back to Palestine.

Yes, Abram himself had feet of clay. He was human, imperfect, sinful, in daily need of forgiveness and lost forever without it. That is why God’s Word and promise meant so much to Abram. It gave him not only the hope of an heir, but the hope of the Messiah, the Saviour, in whom he and all the nations of the earth would be blessed.¹³

Our need today is the same as was the need of Abram. ***There is not a just man on earth who does good And does not sin.***¹⁴ ... ***We are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags.***¹⁵ ... ***Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? No one!***¹⁶

We read in Romans 3:22–23, ***For there is no difference; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.***

When the dinner is finished, the hostess gathers the linens together and puts them into the wash. Some napkins may be less soiled than others; that makes no difference. They must all go through the same cleansing process; they all need to be put out into God’s pure sunlight and to have all the wrinkles ironed out before they can be put away for the next festive occasion.

Likewise every sinner must be washed in the Saviour's blood, purified in the sunlight of God's grace, and straightened out by the leadership of the Holy Spirit before he can be fit for the banquet halls of heaven.

There ought to be no odious comparisons among Christians in the matter of relative goodness or guilt. Every sin, great or small, is a serious offence against God. Every sin helped to press the crown of thorns into the Saviour's brow. Every sinner exacted the same toll and made necessary the payment of the same price by the very Son of God before there could be any thought or hope of justification before God.

When the fruit and the merits of the Saviour's suffering are accepted by the sinner with a truly believing heart, the Lord counts it to him for righteousness, as He did in the days of Abram. This is the clear teaching of our text and of the Bible. This was the basic truth of the Reformation.

“Everyone who forsakes the article of justification does not know God and is an idolater,” said Luther. Scripture says in Habakkuk 2:4, *the just shall live by his faith.* And in Romans 3:28,²⁸ *Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.*

The Rewards of Grace

When Lot gave way to his selfish impulses and chose the well-watered plain of Jordan, God became Abram's Recompense and gave him all the land that his eyes could see, from the north to the south and from the mountains to the sea.

When after the great victory at Damascus Abram accepted no reward, neither from the hand of Lot, nor from the King of Sodom, God said to him, *“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”* Far more precious to Abram than the honours and spoils of war was the gracious assurance of divine favour, forgiveness of sin, life and eternal salvation. The promise of an heir to him was in reality a prophecy of Christ, the gift of the Holy Land a type of the heavenly Canaan, and his earthly riches a trust to be used in God's service.

Sometimes people wonder, when tears come to their eyes, in the heat of trial, whether it pays to be a Christian, whether it pays to walk in the footsteps of Abram, the father of the faithful, and try to be good, honest, loyal, true, and unspotted from the world.

They wonder whether it pays, or not, to be baptised and confirmed and go to church all your life and never grow weary in well-doing. The answer is simple. We cannot earn anything with our works or justify ourselves before God. We cannot even attain that which it is our duty to do.

But God has in store for us wondrous rewards of grace. Even the world has long conceded that honesty pays, and crime does not pay. The entire community respects a person who is sincere in the profession and practice of his religion. But high above this stands the gracious approval of God, who is our Father in Christ Jesus. If He be for us, who can be against us?

If worldliness and dishonesty and sinful pleasures and unbelief would ever come between you and God, crucify the flesh with its affections and lusts, scuttle the gambling barge of sin. Avoid places of temptation. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. If sin lies at the door, keep that door shut. All things are possible for you through Christ, who strengthens you.

We should be ready to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ. We should be unwilling to sacrifice a few things, to forego certain advantages, profits, companionships, and pleasures in defence of the stronghold of our faith and for the extension of God's kingdom.

You have no better friend than Jesus, the Seed of Abram, the Desire of the nations, the Hope of the world. Always be faithful to Him. With all your faults, coming just as you are, your transgressions are no longer imputed to you, your iniquities are forgiven, your sins are covered, and your faith is counted to you for righteousness, a righteousness acceptable before God forever. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Matthew 26:72

² Job 25:4

³ Hebrews 11:8-9

⁴ Genesis 13:8-9

⁵ Genesis 14:20

⁶ Hymn 604

⁷ *Holy Spirit, hear us*, v5, W. H. Parker, Common Service Book of the Lutheran Church #550, Am Lutheran Hymnal #632

⁸ Psalm 50:15

⁹ 1 Peter 5:7

¹⁰ Matthew 7:7

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¹² Heb. 10:14
¹³ Gen. 12:2-3
¹⁴ Ecclesiastes 7:20
¹⁵ Isaiah 64:6
¹⁶ Job 14:4