

THE SUFFICIENCY OF FAITH

GENESIS 15:1-6

What we want from God and what we really need from God can be two different things. Our perception of our need may be totally off target. When God came to Abram with the promise that He would be His reward and His helper, Abram responded to God with a request for what he thought his real need was. He asked God for an heir, a son. If what he understood the will of God to be for his life was to be accomplished, he must have a legitimate heir. This prompted him to ask that Eliezer of Damascus might be accepted as his heir before God. Eliezer had been his faithful servant for many years and in Abram's eyes was qualified to take over responsibilities for the family. God turned down Abram's offer to make Eliezer the heir.

Instead of accepting Eliezer, the Lord took Abram out on a clear star filled night and said to him, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them." After giving Abram enough time to be overwhelmed by the number of the stars in the sky, He then said to Abram, "So shall your offspring be." Then God acted to give Abram what he really needed. In time He would indeed give to Abram a son, but a son was not the greatest need in Abram's life. His greatest need was to be made right with God and to come under the favor of God. More than anything else in the world, he needed that which God requires in order to be right with God.

How God gave Abram what he really needed is recorded in these words, "Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness." As we look at this familiar verse we are reminded of the law of first appearance. This principle of Bible study leads you to put special

emphasis upon the first time a word appears in the Scriptures. Three of the most important words in the Bible appear in this verse for the first time. This is the first time that you find the word “believe” in the Bible. Believe and its synonyms are some of the greatest words found in all of Scripture. “Credited” makes its first appearance in the Bible. It was translated as imputed in the older version. In this word we find the whole concept of justification that is so fully developed by the Apostle Paul in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians. “Righteousness” also makes its first appearance in this verse. This is that basic word that you must understand if you are to understand how God met Abram’s greatest need.

From the letters of Paul we learn that this incident is an illustration of how God meets the greatest need of every human being. Every human being who has ever been made right with God was made right with God just like Abram. It is so strategic to our understanding of the basic message of the Bible that we need to focus our full attention upon these words.

I. FAITH: THE HUMAN SIDE OF SALVATION.

“Abram believed the Lord.” We know from the illuminating words of the New Testament that Abram had taken his first step of faith in the Ur of the Chaldees. However this is the first time believe or faith is ever used in connection with his name in the Bible. While he left his family and home by faith, it was not until the word of the Lord came to him in this fifth revelation that God made of Himself to Abram that is it said of him that he “believed the Lord.” We know from the rest of Scripture that this word embodies everything that is involved in salvation from the human side.

From the letters of Paul, especially the Roman letter, we learn two very significant things about the faith that is described in this verse.

1. Faith is apart from any religious rite, ordinance, or ceremony.

In the fourth chapter of the Roman letter, Paul gives great emphasis to where this statement occurs in the book of Genesis. He is specifically concerned about where it occurs with reference to circumcision. There were many teachers in that day insisting that in order to be right with God you had to be circumcised. Paul went back to this book of beginnings and reminded them that it was not until seventeenth chapter of Genesis that circumcision occurred in the life of Abram, but he was declared to be right with God on the basis of his faith in the fifteenth chapter. So the faith that brought him into a right relationship with God was totally apart from the rite of circumcision or any other religious ceremony.

This insight is still important for us. It is so easy for us to get confused about the nature of faith. We begin to entangle faith with other deeds that we might do and we corrupt the faith. The faith that makes one right with God and receives God greatest blessing is totally apart from any religious rite or ceremony.

2. Faith is totally apart from any works of the law.

Paul drives this point home forcefully in the Roman letter. Again he did it by reminding those early Christians of where this statement occurred in the Bible. It occurred in Genesis fifteen, centuries before Moses stood at Mt. Sinai and received all of the law that was to become the moral guide for the people of God. This statement came before God gave the law concerning the

offerings, the Sabbaths, the different ceremonies that related to the worship in the temple. Abram was declared to be right with God apart from the keeping of any Sabbaths, the offering of any offerings, the observance of any rituals or ceremony. None of this was a part of the faith that brought him this greatest blessing that God could ever give to a human being.

We must always keep our religious works separate from our faith. While the faith that Abraham placed in God did produce works, as James so ably reminds us in his little letter, the faith itself was apart from works.

3. Faith does not have to be perfect in order to receive the blessing.

As we read this statement in the book of Genesis and place it in the context of Abraham's life, it becomes obvious that his faith was real but it was not perfect. In just the next chapter his faith will stumble and come short. His faith will always be less than what it might have been. But it was genuine faith.

Some of us have spent too much time looking at our faith rather than the object of our faith. Our faith will never be perfect. It will never be as strong as it might have been. It will never be as clear as it might have been. The question does not concern the perfection of your faith, but rather the object of your faith.

4. Faith does have to lean on a perfect object.

Moses makes clear the object of Abraham's faith--"Abram believed the Lord." For the first time in the Scriptures we read it in the opening words of this chapter, "after this, the word of the Lord

came to Abram.” As you study the context it becomes rather obvious that what came to Abram was not a message, but rather a person. It is here that we begin to see the personal aspect of “the word of the Lord.” Abram believed the Lord; that is, he believed the word of the Lord that came to him. The Lord made a promise to him so he put his faith in that promise. He began to rely upon the faithfulness and trustworthiness of the One who had come to him with a promise.

The word translated “believed” in this context means to lean all your weight on some strong foundation. It means to build upon a foundation or to rest on a strong object.

Out of the life of John G. Paton, a missionary, there comes a helpful illustration of the core meaning of this word “believe.” When Paton went out among the savages at first, he found that they were on a very low plane of living. They had a language, but the language had never been reduced to writing. For two or three years, therefore, the missionary lived among this primitive people, learning their speech and constantly writing down in a notebook all of the words which he heard them say. After a couple of years of such careful work, he began to translate the Bible, but he soon discovered he had no word for faith, trust, or believe. He must have a word in their language for these words if he was to translate the Bible.

One day he went into the interior of the island with one of the men. They were hunting; and after they had shot several animals, they saw a magnificent deer and soon brought it down. They tied its legs together and put it over a pole, carried it best they could, and went down the mountain to the missionary house near the seashore. The day was hot, the deer was a tremendous burden, and finally they reached the walk near the house, threw their burden down on the ground. Going to

the porch to rest for a period in the long deck chairs that were there, the native said to the missionary, “Oh, it is good to stretch yourself out here and rest.” Paton jumped to his feet, forgetting his fatigue and made the man repeat the phrase over and over.

When the New Testament was translated in to that language, that was the very phrase used to render the idea faith, trust, and believe. So here it would read, “he stretched himself out on the Lord. He rested himself on the Lord.” It is when we do this that God gives us the thing that we need more than anything else in the world.

II. RIGHTEOUSNESS: GOD’S ACT IN OUR SALVATION.

What was it that Abram needed more than he needed a son? What did he need more than he needed an heir? God knew that Abram needed more than anything else a righteousness that would make him acceptable before Holy God. He knew that Abram was not in himself adequate or prepared to stand before Holy God. He would never in himself be able to be acceptable before God. So when Abram began to rest on the Lord in trust, God counted that trust as righteousness for him. “And he credited it to him as righteousness.”

1. The counting is imputation – an act of grace.

The Hebrew word translated in this version “credited it to him” is a word that has in it the root idea of thinking or devising. It came to be associated with calculation and accounting. It has in it that idea of imputing. To put it in language that might be more familiar to us, it has in it the idea

of putting something down on the credit side of the ledger. God accounted to Abraham account righteousness as a gift of grace.

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead has given a beautiful illustration of this act of God. He suggests that you imagine yourself standing before a full-length mirror. You are clothed in black, the black of discouragement, failure, self-loathing, and sin. As you continue to look at yourself in the mirror, you see another person moving toward you in the mirror. You instantly recognize this person as the Lord Jesus Christ. He comes up beside you and takes His robe, a long, beautiful crimson robe, and drapes it over your shoulders. Now your black garments are completely covered with the crimson robe of Christ.”

This is precisely what God did for Abram. As an act of grace, He took the dirty, soiled, defiled garments of Abram, and replaced them with the beautiful, spotless, righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. When God did this He gave Abram exactly what he needed. He gave him everything he would ever need to be acceptable before Holy God.

2. Righteousness is the gift – an act of God.

The truth that we must understand from this statement is that only God could have done this. No other human being could ever have given Abram the righteousness that he needed to make him acceptable before God. The reason no other human being could have done it is rather simple; no other human being has any righteousness that is acceptable before God. Abram didn't have any to provide for himself, nor did anyone else have any that they could give to Abram. The Scriptures remind us that from Adam until now there has not been one righteous human being on

the earth with the exception of the Lord Jesus Christ. So if it was going to be done only God could do it.

That is was an act of God gives us such insight into the nature of our God. The God that Abram met when the word came to him is a God who so desired a right relationship with Abram that He is willing to provide Abram everything that's needed for that relationship to be right. He was ready to provide it even if the provision of that righteousness would cost Him the death of His Son upon a cross almost two thousand years later. And that's exactly what happened! God gave Abram this righteousness imputed it to him on the credit. He charged it against the record of the Lord Jesus, who would become His incarnate Son two thousand years later. When the Lord Jesus came to earth, He picked up the charges against Abram and paid them in full. He worked out in His own deed at the cross that righteousness that Abram had received almost two thousand years earlier.

So this saving act of God in which He gives us what we need – not necessarily what we want – is indeed an act of grace and an act of God. Our part is to believe, God's part is to give us what we need.

Dr. Donald Gray Barnhouse of Philadelphia described a conversation he had with a man about his spiritual need. The man was searching but seemed to be enveloped in a deep spiritual darkness. He just could not see the light! Then almost in desperation he asked Dr. Barnhouse, “what does God want me to do? Tell me and I'll try to do it.”

To this desperate, searching soul, the great preacher said, “All God desires of you is for you to believe Him. He wants you to trust your need into his full hands.” And so it is!

Dr. Barnhouse had it right. That is all God wants of you. He wants you to rest upon Him, to trust in Him, to believe in Him. If you will put your trust in Him, He will give you the thing that you need more than anything else in the world, a perfect righteousness that prepares you for heaven.

(Alternative Outline)

The Sufficiency of Faith

Abraham is the father of the faithful. He provides us an example of what it means to believe God for salvation.

The law of first appearance. Three words appear here for the first time--believe, credited, and righteousness.

I. THE SUFFICIENCY OF FAITH IS IN THE NATURE OF THE FAITH..

1. It is a response to the word of God.
2. It is a reliance upon the trustworthiness of the Lord.
3. It is steadfast commitment to believe.

II. THE SUFFICIENCY OF FAITH IS IN THE SUFFICIENCY OF ITS OBJECT..

1. This separates salvation from works.
2. This separates salvation from ritual.
3. This makes salvation a work of God.
4. This makes salvation a gift of God.