



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: Ignite Your Faith: Genesis 12-25 wk. 1

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What do you believe is necessary for you to be acceptable to God? What do you believe is necessary for you to be acceptable to God? Another way to ask the question is what does it take to be right before God?

Anthropologists and sociologists would tell us that every people group throughout all of history have had a god-consciousness. They've had some awareness of a higher being or multiple beings and out of that they have formed their religions, their religious beliefs. Every religion that has ever existed throughout the history of time has one common feature and that is every one of them believes that to be acceptable to God, we must do something. We must somehow perform in order to be right before God or the gods. If you go all the way back to ancient times, that could be anything from human sacrifices to a whole list of rules and regulations, which is what is more common in our day. All these religious hoops that people jump through to somehow be right before God. And that makes sense.

The reason it makes sense is because everything that we experience in this life would be on a performance basis of some sort. Every relationship we experience, school and out in the marketplace has something to do with what we do and how we behave that makes us acceptable or it makes us somehow right. Therefore, it's only natural that we would conclude that God would operate the same way. Therefore, every religion since the beginning of time has believed that somehow, we have to perform in order to be right with God, except one, except one. Christianity teaches a very different message and that message is very graphically communicated in one of the most significant chapters in all of the Bible and that is Genesis chapter 15. If you have a Bible turn with me to Genesis chapter 15.

Genesis chapter 15 verse one, *"After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision saying, do not fear Abram."* I just want to go that far. There's a number of things in that opening that we may pass by without realizing their significance. For example, the phrase, the word of the Lord came to Abram. That's not unusual language and we might pass by that without realizing its significance.

While it's not unusual, it is a Hebrew formula that was pretty much restricted to usage with the prophets. In other words, if you were to read in the prophets, this line appears over and over and over again. But this is the only passage in the Pentateuch where this line occurs. This Hebrew formula. The Pentateuch is Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, this prophetic formula. We also might notice that God came to Abram in a vision. Again, that's not unusual language in the scriptures, but it is worth noting that there's only two times in the Pentateuch, those five books that this word appears. So, it is very unusual in these books for this to appear.

Now, if you were the first readers, by this time you would be on the edge of your seat because what you would be hearing in these words is there are things that are very unusual. Therefore, they're meant to

grab the reader's attention as a way of saying what we're about to hear must be very, very important because these are very unusual phrases in these books.

One more. It's also the first time in the recorded scripture that we hear the words fear not or do not be afraid. What is Abram afraid of? Well, the chapter opens in verse one with the words "after this". Well, what is this? Well, it's what we studied in chapter 14. Abram had just come off the very first war recorded in the scriptures. Genesis chapter 14. Abram by faith had trusted God and conquered the four kings in the north and he had delivered his nephew Lot and brought him back home and really experienced the great victory by faith. But if you ever noticed that when you step out by faith and trust God and God gives you a great victory and you're really excited about that, how often times you just kind of slide right down into the dumper? As a matter of fact, if you look through the great heroes of the faith in the scriptures, that's a very common pattern. They experienced these great victories by faith and then they kind of slide down into the valley for awhile.

I've had that happen a number of times. Something comes along and, and God challenges you by faith to step out and to trust Him and the adrenaline starts to rush and you get excited about this and you step out by faith and God gives you a great victory and it's all so exciting and then all of a sudden you'd come on the backside of it and reality kind of sets in and you find yourself thinking, what have I done? What was I thinking? Which I think is exactly where we find Abram. He was living peacefully there in the land by the Oaks of Mamre. Word comes that Lot has been captured and they're hauling him up north and he doesn't have a lot of time to think. By faith he rallies the troops and they go and they, by faith rescue Lot and they bring him home and everything looks so good until reality starts to set in. And Abram is thinking to himself, what? What did I just do? Up until that point, he was able to just dwell quietly in the land. Everybody seemed to kind of leave him alone. Everything was peaceful. That would never be true again.

Abram had now established himself as a threat. He had now established himself as a warlord. The Canaanites, the Jebusites, the Perizzites, these people would never look at him the same again. They would look at him now with fear and he now would be a threat to them. And how did he know the Kings in the north weren't going to regather their troops and regroup in a few years, come down and avenge this victory of Abram. So now he's thinking, you know, at one time we were just a happy family here and everything seems so nice and now he's starting to process God, I'm not sure it'll ever be that way again. And so God comes along and he says, Abram, don't be afraid. I am your shield. It's a strong military metaphor. I will be your protector. I'll be your shield. I will take care of you. Every promise that God had made to Abram was of little value if Abram is lying dead on the battlefield and that's where he's at.

We live in a very uncertain world. People live with a lot of fear, a lot of anxiety. Today just to play a sporting event, there will be millions of dollars on security because something could happen there. We're afraid to send our kids to school because of all this stuff that happens in the schools. God calls people to go across the world to become missionaries or to move into our inner city and it's just too dangerous. We need to understand that safety is not a matter of geography. It is a matter of theology. The safest place you can be is in the center of God's will. Safety is not a matter of geography. It's a matter of theology and that's exactly what God was saying to Abram. Abram, I'll be your shield, I'll protect you.

Verse two, *"And Abram Said, oh Lord God, what wilt Thou give me since I am childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, since thou hast given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir."* One other first in this passage, this is the first time that Abram and God have entered

into a dialogue. God has spoken to Abram and Abram has spoken to his family and to Melchizedek and to the King of Sodom, Bera, but this is the first time it's recorded that God and Abram entered into a dialogue.

I don't hear in Abram's words the voice of doubt. I just hear Abram asking for understanding. He understands what God has promised. He's promised to give him all these descendants. He's promised to bless the families of the earth through Abram. But Abram's looking at his circumstances and he's looking at God's promise and he says, God, there seems to be an awfully wide gap between those two. Have you ever been there? Have you ever been there where you look at your circumstances and you look at God's promise and you say, God, there seems to be a very large gap between those two and what you say is, I'm kind of wondering how these two are going to come together.

God's very pleased to answer that. Verse four, *"Then behold, the word of the Lord came," that's our Hebrew formula, "came to him saying, this man will not be your heir, but one who shall come forth from your own body. He shall be your heir. And he took him outside and said, now look toward the heavens and count the stars if you are able to count them. And he said to him, so shall your descendants be."* Abram was saying, God, this is the circumstance. This is your promise. Is it going to be that this one who was born in my house as a servant, he will become my heir? And God says, no Abram. That's not how it's going to work at all. I realize you're a little old, but you're going to have a son and I realize your wife is a little old, but she's going to have a son. And it's going to come from your body and you're going to have so many descendants it's going to be like the stars in the sky. You can't even count them. I'm going to make it happen.

And Abram responds in verse six, *"Then he believed in the Lord and he reckoned it to him as righteousness."* Genesis 15:6 is one of the most significant verses in all of the Bible. It states in as clear a terminology as it can be stated, what it takes to be right with God. Abram believed, and it was reckoned. That's an accounting term. It was credited to his account as righteousness. Abram believed, and on the basis of that God credited him as being right.

The word believe is a Hebrew word that means to place your weight on. One of the ways we would think of that would be whether or not a lake or a pond is frozen enough that you're willing to go out there and put your weight on it. If you believe like this Hebrew word, you're willing not just to say I believe, but you're willing to step out on the pond. You may ask me, do you think the pond's thick enough? And I might say, yes, I do. Mark, would you step out there? Well, that's means I don't know that I really believe it. This Hebrew word doesn't mean some sort of intellectual ascent. It means that I'm willing to step out and put my faith, to trust. Abram was willing to entrust all that he was and all that he had into God's hands and he said, God, okay. I believe your promise. I believe you tell the truth. I trust you, and God said, Abram, on the basis of that, I declare you righteous before me.

There's a number of New Testament passages that give considerable commentary on Genesis 15:6. But before I mention those, is there something in this text, in the Genesis 15 text that helps us understand what exactly is that Abram is believing? What is the basis of this promise? Well, I think there is, so let's read on. Verse seven, *"And he said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess it, and he said, oh Lord God, how may I know that I shall possess it?"* Again, Abram is asking the question to gain understanding. God, I understand what you've said and what you've promised, we will possess this land. But here are the circumstances. There's a whole bunch of people living in the land and they don't seem like they want to leave, and you've promised that I'm going to possess the land. There seems to be quite a considerable gap between those two. How is this going to

happen? In a sense what Abram is saying is God, could we maybe write up a contract that would explain this, in ancient language, a covenant. And God responds to that.

Verse nine, "So he said to him, bring me a three-year-old heifer and a three-year-old female goat and a three-year-old ram and a turtle dove and a young pigeon. Then he brought all of these to him and cut them in two and laid each half opposite the other. But he did not cut the birds and the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses and Abram drove them away. Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. And God said to Abram, know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve. And afterward they will come out with many possessions. And as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace. You shall be buried at a good old age. Then in the fourth generation, they shall return here for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."

God Causes Abram to fall into this sleep and then he communicates to him. And what he communicates is how the events of the future are going to unfold and how his promise will be fulfilled.

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Cara: Bryan, the first thing that God told Abram was, do not fear, but what did he have to be afraid of?

Bryan: I think the big change in Abram's life was as a result of trusting God by faith and rescuing Lot, Abram was now on the map. He was now a threat. He wasn't some family hiding in obscurity in the valley. Now there was evidence that he was strong and powerful, and I think that created a legitimate threat that other nations around maybe would want him eliminated.

Cara: So basically, his steps of faith created that potential for fear.

Bryan: I think they put him in the cross hairs. Yeah.

Cara: Right.

Arnie: So, you made a statement that safety's not a matter of geography, but a matter of theology. Can you talk about that?

Bryan: Yeah, so I would say we're never more safe than when we're in the center of God's will. And I think that's really important to understand. I can be a missionary in India and be more safe than I am in Lincoln, Nebraska, if I'm outside of the will of God. So, it's not geography, it's theology. It's trusting that God will take care of me. I think in Christian circles, we get in some really bad theology and it kind of goes like this: If I'm really faithful and obedient than Satan is attacking me all the more. And that's why my kids are sick and that's why my car won't run. And that's why the transmission fell out. And that's why this and that happened. And all of that theology is basically saying, if I was disobedient, all these things wouldn't be happening to me. And at some point you have to ask the question, wait a minute, where's God in all of that? I'm never more safe than when I'm in the center of God's will and the safest place I can be as to be obedient to God and trust God with the rest of that.

Arnie: You know that is so true and mean so much to me when you say that, even though I was a nonbeliever, my parents worked in Papua New Guinea with the Dani people. They were the last known Cannibal headhunter people. And I thought my parents were just crazy. And I'd say to both of them, you're going to get killed. Their ultimate is to kill you and eat your heart. You guys are crazy. And my mom and dad both would come back, the safest place is to be in God's will and I'd always come back, yeah and to be in California at the beach, but, and nothing bad ever happened to them the 20 years they worked with the Dani people.

Bryan: Yeah. And there's, there are missionaries that die as martyrs. [oh sure] There's bad things that do happen. [Yeah.] But there's no better to be than to be at the center of God's will and the rest I just have to trust Him with.

Cara: Well, that makes me feel a lot better. I'm in your camp Arnie. I've been more afraid as a Christian, but actually have more peace with it. Does that make sense? Because I have the tools to deal with that, but ...

Bryan: One of my favorite Old Testament stories, first Samuel six where God defeats the Philistines, returns the Ark, and there isn't one single Israelite soldier involved in the whole story. [chuckle] it's God's way of saying, I don't need one single person to win. [Yeah. Yeah.] So we kind of think in terms of majority [right] but God's a majority. Yeah. So if, if it's just me and God in the whole world is still a majority, and so there's no safer place than to be on God's team. And, and I have to believe that.

Cara: Yeah. A shepherd killed a giant. [Right.] A little boy. Ah, I've got nothing to worry about, thank you Bryan Clark. In Genesis 15:2, Abraham asks God for an explanation of how his life was supposed to work. Can we ask God to explain confusing times in our lives as well?

Bryan: Well, I would say you can ask and you can ask all you want, but most of the time you probably aren't going to get answers. You know, I think we have to realize these moments, even in the life of Abraham were rare. It's not like he chatted with God every day. But it was unusual that there were these moments, like in chapter 15, but I don't think that's meant to imply that we should expect a similar conversation with God. Uh, so I think there will often be things in life where we have lots of questions and we will not get answers. Sometimes there are preachers who say someday you'll know. And I would contend, I don't know that that's true. Maybe someday it won't matter.

Cara: Yeah, maybe it just won't be as important.

Bryan: Yeah. So for me personally, that's almost half of my life of wrestling with the questions related to my dad's illness and I still don't have answers and I don't think I will have.

Cara: Are you fine with that though?

Bryan: I am. Yeah.

Cara: And this is because God is who He says He is?

Bryan: Yeah. It took me a long time to get fine with it. [Right.] But I, you have to either decide He is who He says He is, or He's not. And that's where you have to land.

Cara: In Genesis 15:6, "Then Abraham believed and God reckoned it to him as righteousness." That's a very important verse then, isn't it?

Bryan: Yeah, that's a really important verse. It's often quoted in the New Testament. It is clearly Abraham's moment of salvation. Paul uses it that way in Romans chapter four that it wasn't works, wasn't circumcision, it was faith. It was justified by faith, not works. It's the same argument Paul makes in Galatians 3. So a really important verse.

Arnie: So for someone listening today who knows God is asking them to take a step of faith, but they're scared to death, what could they do to move forward from where they are being totally freaked out and scared to where they need to go?

Bryan: It's a great question. So first of all, faith always has risks, there's no way to change that. So you have to accept that if you're waiting for God to work out all the details to where it doesn't have risk, then it's not faith anymore. The next thing would be, again, I think we get overwhelmed thinking of way too much. So it's like what would the next step be? So if someone knows God's calling them to something, just take one step in that direction. Trust God with that, and then take the next step. But break it down one step at a time. And as we've talked about before, I think going back and rehearsing God's faithfulness in the past is a very biblical way to strengthen our faith and gain the courage we need to believe He'll be faithful tomorrow.

Cara: How do we start out then - say, you know, you're called to go forward towards something. How would we start out if we're not sure?

Bryan: I think if you're not sure - that's actually a great question. And again, we don't often have God speaking to us directly, so I think it's just praying, it's doing our due diligence, it's considering all the issues involved. But then I think taking steps, I'm convinced if sincerely in your heart you want to obey God, then God will get you where He wants you. It may be a little zig-zaggy path, but sometimes you have to start taking steps for God to redirect.