

OKOTOKS EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH

REDEEMED
FEBRUARY 15-21, 2015



MAIN POINT

God's grace is an unexpected gift that can only be received when we release our grip on our works and trust in His righteousness.

THINKING THINGS THROUGH

Connect the sermon to the study.

1. **Share about a time when you were honored or praised by others but you didn't feel like you deserved it. Was it difficult for you to accept the praise of others? Why or why not?**

Leader: We all want the world to operate on a system of works and reward. We want our efforts in life to be duly rewarded because we all tend to think that our works are righteous. There is a problem with such thinking. Our works might be righteous by our own personal standards, but they are not righteous by God's standards, as "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). The message of the cross was a stumbling block to many people in Paul's day and it continues to be a stumbling block to many people today because they want to be rewarded for their performance in life. By looking at the covenant that God made with Abram, we will see that right standing with God has not and never will be achieved by works. Right standing with God is an unexpected gift that can only be received one way—by faith.

DIGGING DEEPER

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

> **HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ GENESIS 12:1-3.**

2. **List the promises that God made to Abram in these verses. Do you think Abram expected to receive these promises and blessings from God? Why or why not?**
3. **How do you think Abram saw himself? Do you think Abram saw himself as deserving of God's promises and blessings? Why or why not? Why did God choose Abram (see Deut. 7:7-8)?**

Leader: Scripture tells us very little about Abram prior to God's call in Genesis 12:1. All we know about him is that he was the son of Terah and the husband of Sarai and that they were from Ur of the Chaldeans. In short, the text doesn't give us any reason to think that Abram deserved to receive the promises God made to Him. If anything, the fact that he was from Ur implies that before God called him, Abram was an idol worshiper. The focus of these verses is not on Abram's character, works, or personal strengths—the focus is on God who calls and blesses. In Deuteronomy 7, reflecting on the Exodus, Moses said to the people of Israel, "The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought

you out” (Deut. 7:7-8). God’s love is not constrained by our efforts or character traits. God’s love is free. God chose Abram because He loved him. This is good news, because if God’s choice were based on our character or works, we would all be in grave danger because “no one is righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10).

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ GENESIS 15:1-6.

Leader: While grateful for God’s promises, Abram wondered about the value of the reward if he had no son to give it to. Abram had entered Canaan at age 75 with Sarai, who was then 65 years old. Several years had passed and the couple remained childless. Abram may have wondered if he would ever have a son. It seems as though Abram had little hope God would actually fulfill His promises.

4. What does God’s response tell us about His character and grace? How would you expect God to respond to Abram as he struggled to believe and lamented his circumstances?

5. How does God introduce Himself to Abram in verse 1? Why do you think God told Abram these things about Himself?

Leader: Despite the fact that Abram had been doubting God and lamenting his circumstances, God introduced Himself as Abram’s shield and very great reward. In describing Himself this way, God was inviting Abram to know Him in a personal way. God would not only protect and fulfill His promises to Abram, God Himself would be sufficient for him. The deepest desire of every human heart is to know the God who created them. Despite Abram’s doubts and fears, God was offering him an unexpected gift—the gift of a personal relationship with Him.

6. What is significant about Abram’s response to God in verse 6? Why would belief be credited as righteousness? What is the relationship between belief and righteousness?

Leader: Abram recognized God as sufficient and able to keep a seemingly impossible promise. Abram was offered an unexpected gift. He was invited into a relationship with God, and he stepped into that relationship by faith—he “believed the Lord and he credited it to Him as righteousness.” (v. 6). “Righteousness” typically refers to “behavior conforming to a covenant agreement.” In believing God, Abram lived by the expectations of his relationship with God. When God asked him to follow and trust, Abram believed God and entrusted his life to Him. Abram’s faith is a picture of how we can know God as our Master and Lord through Christ (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6).

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ GENESIS 15:7-21.

7. How did God respond to Abram’s doubts (vv. 9-10)? Why did God ask Abram to do this?

Leader: It was a common Ancient Near Eastern custom to seal a covenant with the sacrifice of animals. According to this custom, when an agreement was made, the two people involved would seal the agreement by walking between the severed pieces of the dead animals to indicate that if either broke his end of the agreement, he too would be torn in two.

8. Why did only one partner in the covenant pass between the pieces? What does a “smoking fire pot and a blazing torch” symbolize (v. 17)? How does this story remind you of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Leader: Smoke and fire are symbols in the Old Testament of God’s presence. God met Moses in a burning bush (Ex. 3:2) and God led Israel out of Egypt in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:21-22). Thus in verse 17, God Himself passes between the pieces of the animals. By doing this, God was promising to bear the consequences of His own covenant (2 Cor. 5:21). Abram and everyone after him would certainly fail to honor God with their lives, but the good news for Abram and for us is that God promised to make atonement for us, to bear our punishment so that we could receive His forgiveness by faith. As the lesser person in the covenant, Abram should have passed between the pieces, but instead only God passes through the pieces giving us sure hope that He would fulfill His promises to Abram. God is faithful to keep His promises to us, too, as the covenant God made with Abram has been extended to us through Christ (Rom. 4:23-25).

DOING LIFE TOGETHER

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

9. How does feeling entitled to God’s blessings or deserving of them damage our understanding of God’s gift of grace? How do you wrestle with entitlement? In what areas of your life do you feel entitled to blessings, compensation or reward? How should the unexpected gift of Christ’s righteousness change your perspective?

10. What are some practical ways that we as a group might help each other remember and live in light of the unexpected and unmerited gift of Christ’s righteousness?

11. Why might it be important to remember that you don’t deserve God’s grace as you seek to share it with others? God’s grace refers to His unmerited love that is freely given to all who believe. What could you do this week to demonstrate God’s grace to an unbelieving friend or family member?

PRAYER

Close your group time in prayer together. Spend some time thanking God for His promises and His faithfulness to always uphold His end of the covenant, even when we are unfaithful. Take time to thank God for sending Jesus and declaring us His righteous children. Pray that your group members would believe and live like God is their great reward.

FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following:

- Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:
 - **How has this week's study expanded or deepened your understanding of who God is? Of His faithfulness? His grace?**
 - **How might remembering that God saves by grace through faith increase your joy in Christ? What could you do to regularly remind yourself of this reality this week?**
- A note of encouragement, following up on any specific prayer requests mentioned during your group gathering.
- The challenge to memorize Genesis 15:6.

SPOTLIGHT ON THE PASSAGE**GENESIS 15:1-21**

15:1. Abram's role as a prophet is shown here. Visions were one of two standard means (the other was dreams) by which the Lord revealed His word to people. The only other patriarch who is said to have received a vision was Jacob. The vision's content included a command (Do not be afraid), an assurance (I am your shield), and a promise (your very great reward). The Lord would reward him richly.

15:2-3. Neither God's protection nor His reward seemed important to elderly Abram since all his goods would go to Eliezer of Damascus, a slave born in his house. Engaging in something of a pity party, Abram made seven references to himself (in the Hebrew) in the space of twenty-two Hebrew words and twice utters the complaint that he was childless.

15:4-6. Ignoring Abram's apparent lack of gratitude, the Lord gave Abram one of the great promises of the Bible; the elderly patriarch would produce an heir from his own body. God then made the breathtaking promise that Abram's offspring would be as numerous as the stars. Old and childless, Abram believed the Lord, that is, he affirmed that God is dependable. God credited it to him as righteousness, that is, He judged or accounted that Abram measured up to the standard, conformed to the norm. Abram's faith and God's gracious response to it served as a paradigm of the Christian experience in three different New Testament books (Rm 4:3; Gal 3:6; Jms 2:23).

15:8-9. Abram, the shrewd businessman who had once dealt with earth's mightiest human—the pharaoh of Egypt (12:14-19)—now negotiated with the Lord God. How can he be assured of God's promise? Verse 9 provides the answer. God provided assurance in the form of a solemn commitment ceremony. The cow, female goat, and ram were mammals later authorized for sacrifice in the Law of Moses; however, this is the only time that three-year-olds—specimens in the prime of their lives—were used. Turtledoves and young pigeons were permitted for certain Israelite sacrifices (Lv 5:7). The ceremony here differs from other sacred rituals in the Old Testament involving animals in that no animal parts were burned.

15:13-16. Here the Lord revealed to Abram the prophet an outline of the events of Genesis 46 through Exodus 13. Like Abram himself, his promised offspring would live as foreigners. The land that did not belong to them was Egypt, where they would be enslaved and oppressed (Ex 1:11-14) for approximately 400 years (more precisely, 430 years; Ex 12:40). God would judge the nation they served through a series of ten miraculous plagues (Ex 7:14-12:30), after which they would go out with many possessions (Ex 12:35-36). Though Abram would not live to see these events, he would go to [his] fathers in peace—die a peaceful death—and be buried at the ripe old age of 175 (25:7). Abram's descendants would return to the land in the fourth generation, that is, after four hundred years in Egypt; in this case, each generation seems to be one hundred years, Abram's age when Isaac was born (21:5). The Lord also hinted regarding the purpose of the return of Abram's descendants to the promised land. In large part Israel's return to Canaan would bring God's judgment on the iniquity of the Amorites.

15:17. When the sun had set, the Lord caused a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch to appear and pass between the divided animals. Both elements symbolized essential aspects of God; the smoke perhaps representing divine inscrutability, and the flame God's power. By going between the divided carcasses, the Lord was solemnly obligating Himself to fulfill the terms of the covenant—symbolically indicating that He would Himself be split asunder if He failed to carry out His promises.

15:18-21. The second explicit covenant in the Bible between God and a person (9:9-17) is established here with Abram, obliging God to provide the patriarch with offspring and a geographic inheritance for them that began in the south with the brook of Egypt (either the Wadi El-Arish or the Shihor River—the easternmost branch of the Nile in Egypt's delta region) and extended as far north as the Euphrates River. The list of ten different people groups here is the longest list of Canaan's inhabitants in the Torah. This is the only list to include the Kenites, Kenizzites, and Kadmonites; the Kenites and Kenizzites were probably groups living in the Negev that coexisted peacefully with the Israelites. Perhaps the Kadmonites were the same as the Qedemites, a desert-dwelling enemy of Israel.