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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
June 14, 2015
3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture Lessons: Acts 3:1-10, Matthew 9:9-13

Hymns: 17; 421; 430; 430:8 (242)

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Genesis 15:1-6

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.

(NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Abram getting ahead in this world.

Shortly before the events of our text Abram had an opportunity to get ahead in the world. It was a great opportunity to increase his wealth exponentially. It might have been seen as a once in a lifetime opportunity. You might say it was the equivalent of Abram's chance to win the lottery! There had been a battle between some regional kings during which the cities nearest Abram (where his nephew Lot had settled) were captured by their enemies and many people and much possessions had been taken. Lot and his family and his flocks had been among those taken away. Abram gathered his trained servants, some 300 men along with some neighbors and their servants and pursued the armies who had taken Lot and those with them. God delivered them into their hands and they were able to liberate all the captives before they were sold into slavery, recovering as well all the booty that had been taken. As a result of this victory a great material reward had been offered to Abram. Abram declined to take any reward offered lest the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah would claim that they were the ones who had made Abram a great and wealthy man rather than the LORD. Abram was not about to be in their debt. He trusted the Lord to bless him in all his ways. And so we see in our text –

THEME: God's Gracious Reward for His Children

These are the events referenced when our text begins by saying:

Genesis 15:1 “**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.’”

The truth which Abram had already in his heart, which the Lord powerfully reinforced is how important it is to —

I. Know the Lord as Our Shield and Great Reward - as we travel through this life.

This world offers us the hope of riches and reward that will lead to the “good life” if we simply take what the world has to offer. I am not talking about working at a God pleasing job. That is the Lord's way. That is why He has given us different gifts and abilities. He wants us to use them to His glory, and to know that He will bless

us. I am talking about the “short-cuts” offered by the world, where one cuts moral corners or accepts the world’s terms in a way that will leave us indebted to the world, and in which the world will take the credit for making us successful. When the world entices us with its riches and pleasures, this is when we need to hear the Lord’s words to Abram and apply them to ourselves and our lives.

Abram knew the evil that thrived in Sodom, and served the Lord by shunning that evil. He trusted in the Lord, and he was not disappointed. The Lord came to Abram with this reassuring promise, **“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”** It is easy for us mortals to dwell on the problems of life and begin to fret and worry, and to fear that things may not work out very well for us. It is the rare individual who doesn’t succumb to such fears. We may experience even greater fears, that the world will be offended by the expressions of our faith and then we will pay dearly for shunning the world and the philosophy of this world. The Lord’s reassurance to Abram was that the Lord was Abram’s shield. The Lord would protect Abram from every evil. He would be by His side as a sure defender.

During the time of the Reformation Martin Luther faced the fiercest threats of pope and emperor during his ministry. It was intimidating. He called upon the Lord’s promise. In faith Luther trusted as did Abram that the Lord was his shield from **this world’s prince, scowl fierce as he will. “He can harm us none, he’s judged, the deed is done. One little word can fell him.”** Yes, Luther saw the Lord as **A mighty Fortress and a trusty Shield and Weapon *who* helps us free from every need that hath us now o’ertaken!**” (Luther: A Mighty Fortress TLH 262) This assurance is as true today as it was when the Lord first spoke these words to Abram, when He made this promise again for His children through David in Psalm 46, and when Luther clung to this truth for his own comfort and assurance.

The Lord spoke also of being Abram’s Reward. The Lord responded to Abram’s trust and faith in shunning the wealth of the world. Surely the Lord had already blessed Abram with many temporal blessings. He did after all have such great flocks and herds that he had those 318 trained servants who had been born in his own house. That was exceptional wealth in his day with all

those flocks and herds. The Lord had promised the land of Canaan, the land in which Abram lived as a visitor and nomad, to Abram's descendants. But most important of all was the promise that from Abram's descendants that Seed would come through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. For Abram the spiritual rewards which the Lord held for him were far greater than any material reward or treasure which the world might hold out to entice Abram away from the Lord.

The Lord is our great Reward also. It is only natural for us to get caught up in the pursuit of the material. We live in a material world. We have material needs which the Lord would have us fill through natural means. However, we may find the allure of material wealth increase as the world offers us finer things, from gadgets like phone and home entertainment systems, to cars, to finer homes, to jewels, to pleasures enough to fill our days. But the Lord offers us pleasures forevermore in an eternal life with Him. This He offers us out of grace because we are His children, children whom He has chosen, and called to be His own through faith in Christ Jesus. All that is material will pass away. Only what the Lord offers us in Christ will last. He who has protected us from all harm and danger also assures us of the life that is ours in the mansions of heaven, that place which Christ Himself has prepared for us. This is our great reward, and nothing, absolutely nothing in this world can even begin to compare to this treasure which is ours in Christ! **Don't ever forget that!!**

Our problem is in --

II. Recognizing that the Lord's Great Promises Are Real.

Genesis 15:2-5 "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.'"

Abram was struggling with part of God's promise. It seemed so unlikely to start with. Now ten years had passed. Abram and Sara still had no child. It was ridiculous on its face for a 75 year old man and a 65 year old woman who had never had a child to believe that at that late point in life they would have a son, but then when ten more years had passed and Abram was 85 years old and Sara 75 years old and still no child! Well, I think you can see why Abram struggled with this promise as to whether or not it was real.

This promise was central to all that God had told Abram about the blessings that were to come not only to his descendants, but to all nations. This promise that Abram and Sara would have a son was a central feature to the promise of a Savior being born into the world. God assured Abram that the promise was real; Abram could count on it.

By the way, this wasn't the end of the trial. As you may recall they continued to struggle with believing this promise, Sara even suggesting the "solution" that Abram should have a child with Hagar, and so Ishmael was born. But Ishmael was not the child of promise. The child of promise would not be conceived until Abram was 99 years old and Sara was 89 years old, another fourteen years in the future. However, that did not make the promise of God any less reliable or real. It was real indeed from the very beginning.

Sometimes God's promises may seem incredible to us too, and I mean that in the worst way, that we all too easily question the credibility of God's promises. He promises that all things work together for good, and we say, "What kind of good can come out of this trial?" He promises to never leave us or forsake us, and yet we "**feel**" forsaken and alone time and again. He promises to deliver us from every evil, yet evil surrounds us in this life, and we "**feel**" oppressed by evil. He promises to provide our every need, and yet we "**feel**" in want, and we worry about what the future will bring. We define the matters of life in our limited terms which focuses on today and temporal concerns, overly influenced by our **feelings**. The Lord sees the big picture. He sees the eternal life which He has reserved for us in heaven, while we chaff in the waiting and our faith is tried; that is our weakness. The promises of the Lord are real. God is faithful. God is almighty. God is our gracious Father in heaven who has our beloved Redeemer Jesus Christ sitting at His

right hand interceding for us, and ruling for our good and blessing. The promises of God are Real and True, and in God's good time He will grant us His every blessing. Take it to heart. You will not be disappointed or ashamed.

This was the lesson that was impressed upon Abram. And the Lord, in coming to Abram with His promise of grace and blessing, also worked faith in Abram's heart, resulting in Abram --

III. Receiving the Righteousness that is of Faith.

Our text tells us of an immediate precious blessing that came to Abram.

Genesis 15:6 And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

Abram heard and believed God's promise. Abram would have that son, and Abram's descendants would be like the stars in the sky, too numerable to count. God's promise was God's bond, and Abram, by the power of the Spirit working in his heart, took the Lord at His word. God saw this faith in Abram's heart and credited Abram with righteousness. What a gift! What a treasure! What a blessing! God declared Abram righteous before him. This was not because Abram had never sinned. This was not because Abram would not sin in the future. Abram was a sinner like any and all of us. It was an act of God's grace that came in connection with faith. God saw Abram as righteous and would treat Abram as one who was righteous and holy.

This actually leads us to appreciate a special part of the fulfillment of this promise, because the descendants of Abram were not only to be the physical descendants that would come in the future, but also Abram's spiritual descendants. We read of this in Paul's epistle to the Romans.

Romans 4:20-25 "*Abraham* 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. 22 And therefore 'it was accounted to him for righteousness.' 23 Now it was not written for his sake

alone that it was imputed to him, 24 but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification.

God has promised us eternal life in Christ Jesus, who was crucified for us and our redemption. Jesus died and rose again that we might rise again on the last day. Talk about incredible! Who has ever seen or heard of such a thing happening in this world? And yet the Spirit has worked faith in our hearts; God looks at that faith and credits us with righteousness! Faith is not the one great work that we perform, for it is beyond our capability to believe. That too is a gift of grace.

Ephesians 2:8-9 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

Yes, even our faith comes to us by grace so that no one dare boast. By grace we are declared righteous. By grace we are made heirs of everlasting life. By grace we possess Jesus as our truest and highest treasure. All glory be to God who is our shield and our exceedingly great Reward!

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.