

Abraham—A model for faith.

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At 6:30am one morning last week, my daughter Ana came into my study and sat right down next to me. So rather than telling her to leave, I asked her if she wanted to know what I was reading about. “No”, was her response. (But I told her anyway)

I said “I’m reading about Abram, do you know what that name means?” “What?”, she replied. I told her, “It means “daddy.” “Did you know that God changed his name later to Abraham? Do you know what Abraham means?” “What dad.” “It means “Big daddy.” (She laughed)

Then I told her what I want to tell you today (and this is really how I talk to her)—something happens when the call of God comes into our lives. We go from small living to BIG living.

I don’t know if you’re the type of person who feels like life just happens to you. But one thing I know for sure; when you realize what Abraham realized, life doesn’t just happen to you anymore—you start happening to life. How? Through faith.

Some of you are rolling your eyes because this faith thing can seem so unhelpful. But notice what I said—living a big life comes *THROUGH* faith. In other words, this “Big life” I’m talking about doesn’t happen of your own power. It comes from somewhere else. This is what we’re dealing with when we come to Romans 4 today.

It’s here, Paul argues, that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way we are put right before God (or “justified”). He writes this because converts were coming to the faith wanting to live that same “BIG life” that I’m talking about. However, the problem was, some among them were saying: before you can live that “BIG life” there’s some things you need to do get an audience with God.

With this in mind, the question I’d like to ask is—“What do we need to put us right before God?” To answer this, I’d like to follow three questions: 1<sup>st</sup>: What’s the Problem we face with faith? 2<sup>nd</sup>: What’s the Pattern to follow? 3<sup>rd</sup>: What’s the Promise of God? Problem-Pattern-Promise.

So, first—what’s the problem? If Jesus has put us right with God—how can there be any problem with that? The problem isn’t with him, it’s with us. We doubt Jesus is enough so we do all sorts of things in attempts to put ourselves right before God, people & ourselves. This is why people try so hard to be good, yet fail. This is why people try so hard to be successful, but are still unsatisfied. It’s the same reason people spend so much time on external beauty but still feel ugly. It’s all because we are trying to justify ourselves.

Paul delves into answering this issue in Romans 4 and he uses Abraham to illustrate his point. Read Romans 4:1-3; 10-11 (read text).

Martin Luther explains this text by saying “all good works are only external signs which follow out of faith, and show, like good fruit, that man is already inwardly righteous before God.”

Luther is saying, Abraham did good works (circumcision) *because* God had already counted him as righteous—not *so that* God would count him righteous. The good works were fruit of something that had already happened.

In other words, there's nothing wrong with being good or successful or going out on dates. But if those are the things we think justify us before God, others and ourselves, that's a clue that our hearts have been stolen from God.

So the problem with faith is our doubt. Now we get to the Pattern of Faith Paul is referring to here. It's the story in Gen. 15 about Abraham. (Turn there)

Here we find Abram is after he's just rescued his nephew Lot from an allied force of enemy kings who'd taken Lot and his family captive. It's here, no doubt, that we find him wondering what's going to happen next. Read Genesis 15:1-8 with me. (read text)

Do you see it? There's the problem: Doubt (vs. 8). Here we see God shows up and for the first time in all of scripture he tells an individual... "I'm going to be your shield and I'm going to be your reward"...the response? Doubt. But notice how God deals with it.

Abram says "what about the child you promised?" So God shows him the stars and says "I promise—you're going to have a big family." And verse 6 says Abram believed God and because he believed God—God credited to Abram His righteousness.

Yet, after faith—doubt reappears. Think about it. Three major world religions trace their origins back to Abram and Abram was a doubter. If Abram—the greatest man of faith had doubts—do you think you're going to be any better? Notice how God deals with Abram's doubt. Read vs. 9-11 (read text).

We're on the outside here because we live in a written culture. When something important is about to happen, we write up a contract. But in ancient cultures, things were done orally and dramatically. Abram knew what was about to happen here. God was about to make a covenant with him. Literally the Hebrew verb here means "to cut a covenant."

I taught my daughter this when she was three. We were reading through Genesis and when we came to this text I had her get out her sword (her hand) and pretend like she was cutting one of her stuffed animals in half. Then we walked through the pieces. That's what they did back then to dramatize the consequence of breaking the covenant agreement. (See Jer. 34:18)

Read vs. 12-18. (note: "Deep Sleep"=Same as Adam being in a deep sleep. Note: "thick dreadful darkness"=Same as Mt. Sinai. Note: "Blazing Torch"=Same as the pillar of fire in the wilderness.)

There are two ways to deal with doubt. One approach is the closed way which says "how dare you ask these kinds of questions?" Then there's the open way which says "hey, everyone lives with doubts."

The closed way tends to create communities where people live in fear and insecurity because questions are not welcome. The open way creates communities where anything goes because everyone has their own opinion. Neither way, however, addresses the doubts. But God shows us a third way.

In Answer to Abram's doubts, God doesn't say "You can't ask that!" nor does he say "hey, everyone learns to live with doubts." No. Abram asks "how can I know?" Here we see God answering Abram's doubts by showing him something remarkable.

Abram goes into a deep sleep and God shows up in a thick and dreadful darkness as a blazing pot of fire. Notice what God does—he passes through the pieces of animal halves making the promise that he would give the land to Abram's descendants. But notice something else. Abram never passes through the pieces—only God does.

In ancient cultures, if a subject made a covenant with a king, the subject would pass through the pieces, but not the king. Yet, here, we see God doing exactly the opposite. Here, the subject doesn't even pass through the pieces, but the King does. Why? Here's where we arrive to the Promise of God.

God knows Abram can't uphold his end of the covenant. In fact, if you'll read the story, by the next chapter of Genesis, you'll see Abram taking matters into his own hands by getting in bed with his wife's servant Hagar. Abram fails right off in trusting God. God knows Abram won't stay true to the promise. This is why God passes through the pieces. He's dramatizing this fact and, in essence, saying "Not only will I uphold my end of this covenant—I'll uphold your end. I'll even be cut to pieces even when you fail." Now are you seeing why Abram was a man of such great faith? It's because he saw something.

In John 8:56, Jesus said "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." I wonder what Abram saw while he was in that deep sleep?

This eerie scene points to something greater though. It points to the Promise of faith. For there was another time when a darkness so thick covered the land that Mark 15:33 says the sun was blackened out at noon for three hours. In that darkness Jesus cried "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Isaiah 53:8 explains this by saying: "For he was cut off (covenant language) from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken."

Do you know why Abraham lived such a big life? It's because he knew he had a God who would be cut to pieces for him.

Last week, my daughter and I were reading C.S. Lewis's children's book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. It's about Prince Caspian sailing to the end of the world to look for his father's friends. Edmund and Lucy return to Narnia to help with the voyage and their nasty cousin Eustace, not by chance, ends up being dragged along with them.

We came to the part in the story where the morning after a storm, the crew of the ship drops anchor at an island to make repairs. As everyone is working, Eustace slips away to avoid hard labor. Slipping down a slope, he becomes lost as he finds himself at the mouth of a deep dark cave.

To his horror, a dragon comes stumbling out, lets out a cry and dies right in front of him. Curious as to what the dragon was protecting in the cave, Eustace ventures inside discovering piles of treasure.

As he sits upon the pile he begins wondering how he could get it back to London. He justifies, in his mind, about how this treasure would make him more powerful and more important than anyone else, especially his cousins. However, in thinking dragonish thoughts—C.S. Lewis writes; he became a dragon.

Upon this discovery, Eustace wept in the moonlight. Yet off in the distance he saw a shadowy figure approaching him—it was a Lion. It was Aslan.

Aslan tells Eustace to try peeling off his dragon skin. Eustace tries once, twice, three times—but no success. Underneath, he is still a dragon. Aslan says “you’ll have to let me undress you.”

Eustace later said “I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back and let him do it. The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart...it hurt worse than anything I’d ever felt...Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off...and there it was lying on the grass....And there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch...I’d turned into a boy again.”

The Lion in this children’s story represents Christ. And the story bears witness to the fact that Humans don’t have what it takes to make themselves right again. It takes the power of Jesus Christ. (our attempts to justify ourselves turn us in to evil dragons)

The problem, however, is our doubt. But the way out of doubt is to follow the pattern of Abraham; (As Tim Keller says) “Honest admissions are how Abraham’s are born.”

From Abraham we learn the promise that what we need to justify our existence or to make us right again isn’t more independence, better behavior, looks or status. But **what we need is the God who passed through the pieces**. This is the only way we can be made right.

He’s already spoken, he’s shown you a sign. He’s given you a vision. **Listen to the voice and know that it is the voice of the God who was cut to pieces for you so that you could be justified, declared righteous before Him and live the BIG life Abraham lived.** In conclusion—read Romans 4:20-25.