

OSS- Righteousness, Justification

In Genesis 11:27 we are introduced to a family who lives in Ur of the Chaldeans. Ur was located on the lower Euphrates river in what is now Iraq. The text tells us Terah, the father, had three sons, Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Haran had three children, Lot and two sisters named Milcah and Iscah. Haran died in Ur and Abram and Nahor then took wives. Abram married Sarai, and Nahor married his niece, Milcah. Then the text notes, Terah moved them all to Haran, which is in the upper Euphrates valley on the way to Canaan, the land of Israel. While in Haran, Terah dies.

In Gen 12:1-3, we get a clue as to why the family moved. The Lord had said to Abram, *Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.* ² *"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."* ³ *I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.* Note God promises a land for Abram to live on, descendants who will become a nation, his name will be great, and Abram will become a blessing to all the peoples of the earth.

In verse 4, we note Abram leaves Haran, with Lot, and they depart for Canaan. Just reading this text it is unclear if Abram received the command to leave for Canaan while in Ur or in Haran. But Stephen in his address to the Sanhedrin in Acts 7 gives us a bit more insight. See verse 2, *To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran.* ³ *'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'* ⁴ *"So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living.* So, Abram received God's command while in Ur. Note he obeyed part of the command in that he started off towards Canaan, but all his family went with him.

Gen 12:6 records Abram's arrival in Canaan, and he goes to a small place called Shechem. The verse also notes there are Canaanites in the land. Once he gets there, Gen 12:7 tells us God again appears to Abram and reiterates the promise that God will give him and his descendants the land on which he now is intruding. Abram responds by building an altar, then moves eastward to Bethel. Then we note there is a famine (Gen 12:10). Abram's faith in the promise God made is tested. Note the land is occupied by Canaanites and there is no food. The rest of chapter 12 notes that Abram goes to Egypt, lies to Pharaoh about his wife, but is protected by God and sent away, enriched by Pharaoh, and blessed by God.

Chapter 13 records that Abram and Lot each had lots of livestock, and they could no longer feed them together as they occupied too much space, so Abram graciously defers to his nephew and allows him to choose where he would like to settle, and Abram would go somewhere else. The text notes Lot moves to the Jordan plain near Sodom. God then appears to Abram a third time. Gen 13:14-17, *The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west.* ¹⁵ *All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.* ¹⁶ *I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.* ¹⁷ *Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.* Verse 18, then notes Abram moved his tent to Hebron, where he built another altar.

Chapter 14 notes the adventures of Lot as he is taken captive by King Kedorlaomer, the king of Elam, who makes a raid on the Jordan plain and takes the peoples of Sodom and Gomorrah, for they had stopped paying tribute to him. Abram rescues them all and brings them safely home. At the end of Chapter 14, Abram is met by the mysterious king-priest of Salem, Melchizedek, who as Hebrews notes, is a type of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We now arrive at chapter 15. God has appeared to Abram three times before. Now God appears to Abram a fourth time in a vision. God starts the conversation by stating He (God) will be Abram's protector and great reward. Abram had remembered God's last promise that he (Abram) would have a lot of descendants. But at present he (Abram) had none. Gen 12:4 tells us Abram was seventy-five when he set out from Haran to go to Canaan and presumably this was how old he was when he arrived. In chapter 16 we see the barren Sarai giving Hagar to Abram to have kids. We also learn Abram and Sarai had been in Canaan for 10 years. So presumably the events described in chapter 15 occurred shortly before this time. Note Abram responds to God by reminding Him (God) he (Abram) has no children! *What good are all your blessings when I don't even have a son?* (vs 2). Abram has waited on God for almost 10 years and still God has not fulfilled His promise, and Abram lets God know it. Then we read verses 5 and 6. He (God) took him (Abram) outside and said, *"Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them."* Then he said to him, *"So shall your offspring^[d] be."*⁶ *Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*

Verse 6 is one the most critical verses in scripture for it lays out how we are to respond to God's promises. We are to believe them. Not to work for them, not to earn them, or to demand them. We are to believe them and note, God credited righteousness to Abram. The NLT says, *and Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith.*

In the rest of the chapter, God confirms His promise by sealing it with an ancient contractual custom in which each party was to walk through the carcasses of sacrificed animals while repeating the contract to each other. This procedure signified the seriousness of the contract because if one of the parties broke it the blood of the animals and of the other party would be on the one who broke it. Note what God does. In the form of smoke and fire, symbolizing His presence, God alone walks through the animals, signifying to Abram that God alone would be responsible to fulfill the contractual terms. This was an unconditional promise made to Abram. Abram had no contractual responsibilities. God alone would fulfill its terms.

Verse 15:6 introduces one of the great theological truths of our salvation and that is, when we place our trust in Christ as our savior, he credits us with righteousness. Credit is a banking term. It means adding something to your account. When I take my money or a check made out to me and go to my bank, the cashier deposits that money or check into my account. The banking term for this process is called crediting an account. It is adding something that was not there before. Similarly, when I withdraw money, it is taking away money and is called a debit to my account.

Righteousness means two things: First, It is what God is. Righteousness is one of God's attributes, (1 Jn 2:29). It means God is fair, just, true, pure, holy, and perfect. Second, righteousness is what God does. In this regard Righteousness is the outward manifestation of God's Holiness. Every decision, every willful act is pure, right, and fair.

Now here is the hard part. Scripture says that when Adam and Eve ate of the tree of good and evil, thereby disobeying God, they entered an unrighteous state. Where before they were without sin, now they had sin credited to their account. As Ps 14:2 notes, *The Lord looks down from heaven on the entire human race; he looks to see if anyone is truly wise if anyone seeks God.*³ *But no, all have turned away; all have become corrupt.*^[a] *No one does good, not a single one!* Paul translates Psalm 14 in Romans 3 as *there is none righteous, no not one.* Isaiah 64:6 picks up on this theme and compares our attempts at goodness as menstrual rags, *We are all infected and impure with sin. When we display our righteous deeds, they are nothing but filthy rags. Like autumn leaves, we wither and fall, and our sins sweep us away like the wind* (NLT).

Now for us this is a problem because a Holy Righteous God cannot stand the presence of an unholy, unrighteous creature—and that is what we are. Romans 5:10 states that because of our sinful and unrighteous state we are not just pitiable dirty creatures, we are God’s enemies because we rebelled against him.

But here is the incredible news. Scripture also states that despite our unrighteous and rebellious state, God loves us (Rm 5:8, Jn 3:16). So, what was God to do? Rms 5:6 tells us, *when we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners.* 2 Cor 5:21, adds this, *For God made Christ, who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

This is as profound a verse as you will ever read in scripture. At salvation, God, in his grace, declares us, who were his enemies, who were rebellious, who were unholy, who were unrighteous; He now declares us Righteous, and makes us fit for his presence. When Adam and Eve sinned, God provided animal skins and clothed them so they could be in his presence. This was a type of our salvation to come; as God killed an innocent animal to provide a covering for Adam and Eve, so God provided a perfect sacrifice, Christ, and killed him, so that as Gal 3:27 says we may be *clothed with Christ.* Or as Is 61:10 says *I am overwhelmed with joy in the Lord my God! For he has dressed me with the clothing of salvation and draped me in a robe of righteousness.* When you place your faith in Christ, God takes Christ’s righteousness and credits it to your account.

Now let us return to the story of Abraham. After God contractually promised to Abram his descendants would be as the stars of the sky in Gen 15, we get to chapter 16. As Abram and Sarai had no children, they decided to help God out, so Sarai gives Abram her handmaiden Hagar to have a child on her behalf. We finally get to chapter 17 where God again appears to Abram, changes his name, reiterates the land promise, and tells him a son will be born to him and Sarah in a year’s time. Genesis 17 also tells us Abraham was 99 years old and would be one hundred at the time of Isaac’s birth, while Sarah would be ninety.

Paul picks up this story in Rm 4:18, *Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”*^[a] ¹⁹ *Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead.* ²⁰ *Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God,* ²¹ *being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.* ²² *This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.”*

Now note verse 23-24, *The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, ²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.* God's crediting of righteousness was not just for Abraham. It is for anyone who comes to God by faith and places their trust in Him as their savior.

Note there is another theological concept to be seen here. It is given in verse 25, *He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.* Justification is a term very closely related to Righteousness. To justify means to declare a favorable verdict. It is a legal term which means to declare righteous. The picture is one of a courtroom where we stand as guilty sinners before God. He has only three options to pursue: he can condemn us and punish us (as we are guilty sinners): he can compromise his own character and receive us as we are as unholy, dirty, sinful creatures, or He can provide a substitute and exchange the character, person, and state of the substitute for us. This third option is the one God decided to implement. God provided Christ and made him, who knew no sin, to be sin for us, (our substitute) that we might be the righteousness of God.

Justification, then, is God's gracious declaration that all the demands of the law are fulfilled on behalf of the believing sinner through the righteousness of Jesus Christ; we have been credited with Christ's righteousness and are therefore free of guilt and condemnation. It is as if God looks at our bank account and now declares we have righteousness in the bank. Our record is now clean. We have been acquitted and now enjoy God's favor Rm 5:17-21.