

Counted as Righteousness

Sermon preached by Jonathan Huang for Houston Chinese Church
Sunday, May 14, 2023

❖ Introduction

- Back on a rainy day in December of 1988, my family and I were traveling on a highway here in Houston, on the way to the airport for a trip to Colorado.
- I was two years old at the time. And sitting there with me in the car were my parents and my fourteen-year-old sister, Carol, who was in the back.
- There was a truck driving several vehicles ahead of our car. And all of a sudden, there's this refrigerator that falls from the back of the truck onto the road. And it leads to this chain reaction, where the cars behind the truck stop, one after the other.
- And what happens is my dad stops our car in time. But the eighteen-wheeler behind us isn't able to stop. And it rams right into the back of our car.
- In a situation like this, the car doors in the back can get jammed, which they did. But the bigger problem was that somehow the collision set our car on fire.
- And moments later, my sister's life is taken from her because she couldn't get out in time.
- My parents and I were able to get out of the car. But my dad, in trying to go back and rescue my sister, ended up suffering horrible burns all over his body and almost died himself.
- Romans 8:28 says this, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (NIV 1984).
- How can God allow something like this to happen to my family and still hold true to this promise?
- All things, God? *Really?* Even this?
- I know there are some of you here this morning who are going through a very difficult season in life right now.
- You might be going through a serious health issue or dealing with the health issues of someone you love. It might be a deep strain in a relationship with someone or a trial that you're going through at work.

- And in the midst of all this, you might be wondering: can I really trust God? Will he really pull through and carry me through all that I'm going through right now?
- See, we live in a world where seeing is believing. You don't believe something until you can prove it or verify it with your own senses. So if you can't see it, touch it, taste it, feel it, or hear it, how in the world can you know something is true?
- So if you're on the outside looking in, *Christians are weird*.
- We Christians believe in a God we can't see.
- We Christians trust that what God says about this world and the world to come are absolutely true.
- And we Christians have this thing called faith, which is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1, ESV).
- The question I want to ask this morning is this: In a world where seeing is believing, what does it look like to trust in a God we can't see, who says he can do more than we can imagine?
- We're continuing on today in our study of the book of Genesis. And more specifically, we've been looking at the life of a man named Abram, who turns out to be a key figure in the overall storyline of the Bible.
- I want to invite you to turn in your Bibles to the book of Genesis chapter 15. Genesis chapter 15. Genesis is the first book of the Bible. Which makes things easy. So if you're new to Christianity or not really familiar with the Bible just yet, you can use the pew Bible in front of you if you'd like and just flip to the first book you see there. That's Genesis.
- So we're in Genesis chapter 15, and we'll be looking at verses 1-6.
- Just for some context, back in chapter 12, Abram's given a promise by God that he'll become a "great nation" and that in him "all the families of the earth" will "be blessed" (Gen. 12:2-3, ESV).
- Abram's told to leave this place called Haran and go to a land that God would show him. And he does so by faith at the ripe old age of 75 (Gen. 12:4).
- He heads southwest for the land of Canaan, which is roughly where modern-day Israel is on the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea.
- God then promises Abram that his offspring would be *given* the land of Canaan (12:7).

- In chapter 13, Abram's given a reminder of God's promise about the innumerable offspring he's going to one day have. And God does so by comparing the number of Abram's future offspring to the "dust of the earth" (Gen. 13:16, ESV). They won't be able to be counted. God's going to do the unimaginable.
- So now we're here in chapter 15. And we see God approaching Abram in a vision. And from these next six verses, what I want to do is to look at this story of Abram and see what we can learn about his faith and the God he put his faith in.
- The question I'm posing for us again is this: In a world where seeing is believing, what does it look like to trust in a God we can't see, who says he can do more than we can imagine?
- The main thing I want you to take away from this morning is this.
- **The more we know the God we trust, the more we can trust in him.**
- And I see three specific things in this passage about the God we trust in that I want to show you. And in doing so, I hope to grow your trust in a God that *none* of us can see. But he's *real*. He "rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6, ESV). And he's "able to do" far "more than all we ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20, NIV 1984).

❖ **The first thing I see is this: trust in a God who can handle your doubts.**

- Look down at verse 1 with me: "After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: 'Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great'" (Gen. 15:1, ESV).
- Here in this chapter, we get a glimpse of Abram's state of mind at this point. "Fear not" is the word from the Lord (Gen. 15:1, ESV). Which could mean that God knew Abram was feeling unsettled.
- Maybe he was feeling anxious about how God was actually going to come through on his promises.
- It was looking pretty hopeless because his wife still hadn't borne him any physical children and they were only getting older.
- Look down at verse 2 with me: "But Abram said, 'O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir'" (Gen. 15:2-3, ESV).

- Apparently, Abram was worried that because he had no physical offspring of his own, his heir, at this point, was going to be Eliezer, a servant of his.¹
- Back in those days, if you didn't have any physical children of your own, then it was customary to pick out someone from among your slaves to inherit all that was yours.²
- So there are some doubts here in Abram's mind because God's promises to him and his present reality don't add up.
- Offspring that will make a great nation, that will be uncountable like the dust of the earth...no physical child. There's simply no link to bridge the present realities with the unimaginable, mind-blowing promises of God.
- And the word to Abram here is: relax. Trust me. I know what I'm doing. The story of Abram is the story of how God, being fully in control, fulfills his purposes and his plans in his own timing and in his own way.
- And what this story also tells us is that with God, there's room for questions. There's room for doubt.
- There's something to learn here for anyone who also struggles with doubts when it comes to trusting in an unseen God who claims some unimaginable things when reality just doesn't seem to add up.
- God's given Christians many different promises in the Bible. And one of those I mentioned earlier. It's incredible. It's hard to believe sometimes. But Romans 8:28 says that God's going to work *all things* for the "good of those who love him" and "have been called according to his purpose" (NIV 1984).
- From Abram's story today, what I want you to see is that even in embracing promises of God like this for ourselves, there's room for questions. There's room for doubt. Because we trust in a God who can handle our doubts.
- This past week, I had the opportunity to ask my mom over a phone call more questions about her experiences with our family's car accident.
- It's been over 34 years now.
- Losing a fourteen-year-old daughter is no easy thing.
- Did she have doubts about God after the accident happened? Absolutely.³

¹ Richard R. Losch, *All the People in the Bible: An A–Z Guide to the Saints, Scoundrels, and Other Characters in Scripture* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 102. Logos Bible Software.

² Losch, *All the People in the Bible*.

³ The details in this section from my mother are from a phone conversation that I had with her on May 11, 2023.

- Did she ever wonder how God would bring good out of all this tragedy? Absolutely.
- Something my mother wondered was why such a bad thing could happen when they were “good people” and went to church.
- She had questions: “Where’s God?” Why did he take away her “beloved daughter?”
- I think it’s a good thing to be honest with where you’re at. To expose the doubts and confusion and questions you have inside of you when faced with hard things in life.
- When trusting in a God you can’t see to pull through for you is the last thing you want to do.
- But just like the way God deals with Abram, what I want you to see is that with our God, there’s room for doubt and confusion and questions. He can handle them. The question is: how are *you* going to handle them?
- For those of you who are Christians but are going through a really difficult season of life right now, my challenge to you is to be honest with your doubts, your questions.
- When you’re with your small group this week, or with a trusted friend, share the hard things that are going on inside of you. Seek out the counsel and prayer of others in our church.
- Because God can use other Christians to be the means by which he extends his gracious comfort and care to you and to me, in our deepest moments of pain and confusion.
- For those of you who are parents, make it a habit to talk with your children regularly about faith. What I try to do is to bring things up in the car as I’m driving my kids to school. My kids will know this. But I like to ask each of my sons something like this: “What question do you have about God, Christianity, or being a Christian?” For my oldest, I’ll add an option to ask about other religions.
- And just give them a chance to ask away and talk about what’s on their minds.
- Make space in the life of your family for spiritual conversations, especially when your kids are still young and forming their thoughts about the world and how it all works.
- For those of you in here who haven’t crossed the line of faith yet and still have lingering doubts and questions about Christianity, here’s what I would say to you. It’s one thing to have doubts and questions.
- It’s a whole other thing to do due diligence in dealing with those doubts and questions you have about God.
- Don’t let them just sit there, mulling around inside of you.

- Let me encourage you to schedule a meet up with someone you know is a Christian this week. And talk through some of the things you've always wondered about when it comes to faith and spiritual things.
 - There's nothing wrong with having doubts or questions. But there's something missing in the equation if you never look for answers.
 - So in a world where seeing is believing, what does it look like to trust in a God we can't see, who says he can do more than we can imagine?
 - **Listen: the more we know the God we trust, the more we can trust in him.**
 - So first, trust in a God who can handle our doubts.
- ❖ **And second, trust in a God who reveals his plans at his own pace.**
- Moving along in this exchange between God and Abram, we see how God responds to Abram and his doubts.
 - Look down at verse 4 with me: “And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: ‘This man [meaning Eliezer, Abram’s servant] shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.’ And he brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be’” (Gen. 15:3-4, ESV).
 - Earlier in Abram’s story, God makes some unimaginable promises to Abram. He was going to make Abram into “a great nation” that would eventually be a blessing to “all the families of the earth” (Gen. 12:2-3, ESV).
 - The offspring that God was going to give Abram was going to be as innumerable as the “dust of the earth” (Gen. 13:16, ESV).
 - But here in chapter 15, God reveals a bit more of his plan to Abram. God gives Abram a bit more clarity about how he was going to actually fulfill his promises to Abram.
 - That revelation goes like this: all the promises for Abram weren’t going to come about through Abram’s servant. No, they were going to come about through his very own son.
 - There are times when God graciously reveals a bit more of how his plans and purposes are going to unfold in our lives, things we previously didn’t know or understand, in order to dispel confusion about something. In order to reassure us that he knows what he’s doing and where he’s taking us.

- For Abram, God’s revelation here doesn’t necessarily answer the *how* question completely. There’s still a sense that God’s going to have to do the impossible—something supernatural—in order for these promises to be fulfilled.
- But my point is that we trust in a God who reveals his plans at his own pace.
- And in his sovereign wisdom, our job is to just keep walking. Just keep pressing forward and trusting him.
- Many of you know that I’m in the middle of a long journey trying to start up a new church—a multiethnic church out in West Houston. But it’s been a struggle of mine trying to form our team because we want it to be as diverse as possible before moving onto the next stage in church planting.
- So God’s brought people from our church to be part of our team. But I’ve also been looking for people outside of HCC to join, especially for people who don’t look like me. It’s been hard to keep waiting in this season for this team to form.
- And with each person or couple that God leads to join our team, God gives us a bit more clarity of what this team’s going to look like and how this is all going to unfold.
- But I think the story of Ethnos Church will be one where, looking back, we’ll celebrate the faithfulness and goodness of God. How will this diverse church planting team come together? Who will be the people this church eventually reaches together and helps come to know Christ? How are we going to multiply and send out our best to plant more churches down the line?
- There’s so much to look forward to. But our God is a God who reveals his plans and his purposes at his own pace.
- Our job is to just keep walking. Just keep pressing forward and trusting him.
- In the same way, you might be in a situation where you don’t know exactly how God’s going to unfold his plans.
- What’s my life going to be like after high school or college or grad school? Who am I going marry one day? Should I move and take this new job or stay here in Houston? How is this problem with my health going to turn out in long run?
- And what can drive us to worry is that things aren’t happening on our own timeline or our own conception of how things should work out.
- But God says, “...my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” (Isa. 55:8, ESV).

- And “as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9, ESV).
 - So keep living out each day, just like Abram would have, and faithfully carry out what’s in front of you *today*. Trust that God will work things out in the way he wants. And that he’ll give you glimpses of the next steps when he thinks best.
 - There are times the only thing to do is to wait. And sometimes, waiting’s just the hardest part about trusting God. He’s not coming through at the pace you expect and so you get disappointed or discouraged.
 - But God knows what he’s doing.
 - And the Bible reassures us that none who wait on God will “be put to shame” (Ps. 25:3, ESV).
 - **The more we know the God we trust, the more we can trust in him.**
 - So trust in a God who can handle your doubts. Trust in a God who reveals his plans at his own pace.
- ❖ **And finally, trust in a God who honors those who simply take him at his word.**
- In this whole exchange between God and Abram, probably the most significant verse to look at is verse 6. Look down there with me: “And he [that’s Abram] believed the Lord, and he [God] counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6, ESV).
 - Abram believed what God was telling him, simply put...about all that God was going to do for him in the future, that the number of his offspring was going to be as uncountable as the number of the stars in the sky. That as impossible as it was turning out to be, he was going to have those promised descendants come about through his own flesh and blood.
 - And what’s remarkable about what happens next is that God counts this belief, this faith, this trust of Abram to God and what he was telling him, as *righteousness*.
 - Abram simply took God at his word. And God honored him by counting Abram’s faith in God as righteousness.
 - Now what exactly does that mean?
 - It means this: Abram’s faith in God, his simple trust in what God was telling him, was enough for God to put Abram in right standing with him.

- Listen to what one commentator says about this: “Abraham believes God’s word to him of a S/seed through whom he will bless the nations, and God reckons Abraham’s sure confidence in him to keep that promise as equivalent to keeping the law, as equivalent to all righteousness.”⁴
- The apostle Paul, later on in the New Testament, as he writes his letter to the Romans, explains this verse by connecting it to the way becoming a Christian works.
- Listen to what he says in Romans chapter 4, starting in verse 20.
 - No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.²² That is why his faith was ‘counted to him as righteousness.’²³ But the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone,²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”
- Listen. Genesis 15:6 was written for us. God honored Abram, who simply took God at his word. And even now, God will honor those who simply take him at his word and are fully convinced that he can do what he promises.
- What are those promises?
- There are some of you here today who need to hear some very specific promises that God’s making to you.
- Some of you may know a whole lot *about* Christianity, but just not ready to take any next steps of personal commitment to Jesus. You’re just not there yet. And that’s ok.
- Some of you here might not know much about what it means to be a Christian at all, but are just curious. You’re interested in learning more.
- Now I know the message of Christianity can seem out of this world to some people. But I want you to understand that we Christians look at this world the way we do because we’re simply taking God at his word.
- We’re taking God at his word when he tells us that not only did he make everything in this world, but he made everything in this world for one reason and one reason alone: to glorify him as king.
- We’re taking God at his word when he tells us that everyone of us is born into a situation where our hearts are so naturally corrupted by sin, that we’re enslaved to a mindset of rebellion to his kingship. We want nothing to do with him.

⁴ Bruce Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 334.

- We're taking God at his word when he tells us that everyone of us is going to be held accountable for our rebellion against him. And that we're obligated to pay back our debt to him by spending an eternity in hell.
- But we Christians also take God at his word when he tells us that in his great love for us, he planned a rescue mission for sinners like us. It involved his Son, Jesus Christ, coming to earth in human flesh to live the life we should have lived and to die the death we should have died.
- We Christians take God at his word when he tells us that in his mind, sins can't be forgiven unless there's literal blood that's shed (Heb. 9:22, ESV). We take God at his word when he tells us that Jesus was sent to shed his blood and die in our place on the cross and to purchase the forgiveness of our sins.
- We Christians take God at his word when he tells us that Jesus was raised back to life and lives, even now, to be the One to whom "every knee should bow...and every tongue confess that [he] is Lord" (Phil. 2:10-11, ESV).
- And so the question is this: will *you* take God at his word? Will *you* take God at his word when he promises that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13; cf. Joel 2:32)?
- Will you take God at his word when he promises that he'll forgive you of your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness if you simply confess your sins to him and receive the forgiveness based on what Jesus did on the cross for you (1 John 1:9)?
- Will you take God at his word when he says that you can be made right with him by turning away from your life of sin and turning to Jesus as your Lord and Savior?
- Just like Abram, God promises to count your faith in Jesus and what he's done for you as righteousness, because he's going to "credit" to you the righteousness of Jesus himself (Rom. 4:23-24, NIV 1984).
- The Bible says, "God made him [that's Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21, NIV 1984).
- For those of you who are Christians here, I want you to notice something interesting that I picked up from reading a commentary.
- This story of Abram in Genesis 15 isn't the first time we see Abram exercising faith in God.⁵ No, Abram's already been living a life of faith all the way up to this point. And in chapter 15, he simply continues to trust God and take him at his word.

⁵ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 423.

- What this tells us is that faith is something we continually exercise towards God in the Christian life. It's not a one-time thing.
- Last month, there was a period of time where I was just struggling with some very sinful and impure thoughts that would come to mind.
- They were typically thoughts that were intrusive and unwanted. But nevertheless, unholy and dishonoring to God.
- During my prayer times, I would confess these sinful thoughts to the Lord. And as I did, I also began to rediscover the gift of taking God at his word through his promise in 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (ESV).
- And I would just pray something like, "God, thank you for your promise to cleanse me from all unrighteousness if I confess my sins. God, I receive this promise for myself by faith."
- And you know, even after being a Christian for many years, I'm so grateful for the gift of a clean conscience.
- You see, faith isn't something that's a one-time thing. It's something we're to exercise day after day in the Christian life.
- Some of you might be struggling with some deep-rooted sins right now.
- Let me encourage you to schedule a time to meet with one or two trusted Christian friends by the end of this week. And share what's been going on in your life and receive prayer and accountability.
- But at the same time, in your personal times of prayer this week, I want you to take God at his word and pray through 1 John 1:9, confessing your sins, and experiencing God's cleansing by faith.

❖ Conclusion

- On the morning that my family boarded the car on the way to the airport, one thing that my mom remembers is that because they were in such a rush, she put me as a two-year-old in the front, and had me share a seatbelt with her.
- She'd never done that before because I usually sat in the back with my sister.
- But because of that decision, God providentially spared my parents of losing both of their children on the same day.

- And the good that eventually came out this tragedy was that my parents drew closer to God. God turned them from being simply church-goers chasing after the American Dream to Christ-lovers, seeking “first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33, ESV).
- God works all things “for the good of those who love him” and “have been called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28, NIV 1984).
- **The more we know the God we trust, the more we can trust in him.**
- So trust in a God who can handle your doubts. Trust in a God who reveals his plans at his own pace. And trust in a God who honors those who simply take him at his word. Let’s pray.