

Grace in Genesis (v)

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 15, Grace in Genesis number 5. Some of you may have been to the southern Swedish city of Malmo, and you'll know that it's dominated by the famous Turning Tower.

At 190 meters high, Malmo's Turning Tower is the tallest building in Scandinavia. Having seen it for myself, I can testify it's an amazing structure, towering as it does over the city of Malmo and the Orison Strait.

Whatever you are in the city, you can see it. What the Turning Tower is to Malmo, Abraham is to the story of Genesis, the Old Testament, the whole Bible.

Whatever you are in the Bible, you can draw a fairly straight line to Abraham. So he's held up as a hero of the faith in Hebrews, in Romans as the model of faith, in the Gospels as the one whose covenant Jesus completes, and in the Psalms as the foundational figure in God's dealings with Israel.

You can't get away from him. He dominates the skyline of God's grace. And at another time, we need to survey the life of Abraham more completely.

[1 : 23] But this evening, I want us to enter into the sacred halls of Genesis 15, so that we can discover together the value of the grace he discovered nearly 4,000 years ago.

The thing is that the tallest, greatest tower in this passage is not Abraham, Abraham or Abram as I call him at this early stage in his life, at all.

It is, first of all, the grace of courage in verse 1, then the grace of condition in verses 2 through 7, and then the grace of cost in verses 8 through 21, all of which combine to form the greatest, tallest, and most magnificent structure dominating the skyline of our Christian faith and experience, namely, God's grace toward us in Christ Jesus.

And I pray that as a result of tonight's study, you'd experience that grace for yourself. First of all, in verse 1, we have the grace of courage.

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward. Over the centuries, Christians have taken great comfort from these first few words.

[2 : 42] You know, this is the first time that God speaks these immortal words to any human being. Do not be afraid. It will not be the last.

In fact, the command, do not be afraid, is the most frequent command of God in the Bible. If you want to know what God requires of you, it's in this command, repeated 76 times in the Bible.

Do not be afraid. God makes this command to kings and to commoners and to men and to women and to warriors and to slaves.

This is what God commands. Do not be afraid. This is his great command. It's not the first time the word fear is used in the Bible.

In Genesis chapter 3 verse 10, having eaten of the forbidden fruit and dragged the world into sin, Adam says to God, I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked.

[3 : 55] So I hid. In other words, mankind was not created to be afraid. Fear only came into our psyche after the fall.

It's not part of the original creation. Our catechism helpfully distinguishes, we spoke about this on Wednesday night, a little bit of the Central City Group, between sin and the miseries of sin, the miseries which sin have brought into our experience, one of which is fear.

So there is far more to this command, do not be afraid, Abram, than meets the eye. Genesis 15 verse 1, and the command not to be afraid, represents the relief of the miseries of sin, the first reversal of the curse of the fall.

What Adam became because of his sin against God, afraid. God now begins to reverse. God begins to relieve the miseries of sin.

And how we need, as human beings, that relief. I reckon that of all the miseries of sin, fear is the most common.

[5 : 20] Tell me, which of you is never afraid? I tell you, I'm afraid of my own shadow. I'm afraid of the darkness, and of the light, and of death, and of life, of people, and of myself.

There is nothing against which we cannot have a phobia. That's the Greek word for fear. And no single person in this world has complete mastery over their fear because it's one of the miseries which sin has brought into this world, and it shall only be overcome in heaven where there is no sin. Hell shall be a place of unmitigated and uncontrolled fear. Heaven shall be a place of peace and courage. Abram had much of which to be fearful, not the least of which that he and his wife were childless and homeless.

Abram was not the first. Abram was the first, rather, but he will not be the last to hear the kindly voice of a loving God saying to him, do not be afraid.

The misery of fear belongs to the old order of things. The grace of God in Christ has come to overcome on the cross. Grace can overcome fear. Grace brings courage to those in the darkness and the shadow.

[6 : 50] God commands courage, and his grace enables courage. He commands what he gives, and he gives what he commands, as St. Augustine rightly said 1,500 years ago. He commands courage, courage, and he gives courage by his grace.

Because the grace God gives us is courageous. It enables prisoners like Paul and Silas to sing even while they're in chains. It enables those who are weak in their illnesses to be inwardly strong. It enables those who are naturally timid to be mighty in word and deed for him. As Paul will later say to his young friend Timothy, God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power.

But words mean little without action, and that's why God always gives a reason why he commands, no, why he commands us against fear. And here it is that we should take heart.

I'm your shield. I'm your very great reward, he says to Abram. God and his infinite, eternal, and unchangeable love and commitment to us are the reason for our courage.

[8 : 07] There's no bluster here, there's no false bravado. We have every reason for our courage and none for fear if God is our shield who's protecting us and God himself is our great reward.

For he who is with us is greater than all those who are against us. If he is for us, then who can be against us? Can the darkness be death or the light be lethal when Christ himself is our light?

The promise of God, always attached as it is to the command not to fear, gives us the reason for courage. Abram might be childless and homeless at this point but God's his protector and God's his reward.

This is God's great command but there's a reason attached, a promise given. There is no promise of God which cannot overcome our fear.

No phobia of men which can overwhelm God's protection and presence and that's the grace which reverses Eden's curse.

[9 : 26] The grace which brings courage. Secondly, from verses 2 through 7, we have not only the grace of courage, we have the grace of condition.

The grace of condition. But Abram said, O sovereign Lord and so on. The relationship between God and Abraham can best be understood in terms of the language of covenant.

In fact, the so-called Abrahamic covenant is the central covenant in the Bible. That covenant which is ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ. And elements of that covenant are found right here in Genesis 15.

It begins in verse 1 with God promising to be Abraham's God. That's number 1. In verse 4 through 5, God promises to make Abraham's descendants into a numinous nation as numerous as the stars in the sky.

That's promise 2. Then in verse 7, God promises that Abraham's descendants will take possession of the land in which Abraham at present is a refugee, the land of Canaan.

[10 : 27] That's promise number 3. God makes all these stupendous promises to Abraham, the second and third of which are utterly impossible at this time because Abraham and Sarah, his wife, are both childless and homeless.

Let me say that again. The second and third of these promises detailed between verses 2 and 7 are at this time utterly impossible because Abraham and Sarah are childless and they're homeless. We saw last time from Genesis 11 that Sarah was the first human being to be barren, to be sterile. She could not have children. Such a thing was impossible for her.

And as for the promise of the land, well, you only have to see the kings Abraham had to do battle with in Genesis chapter 14 to realize that taking possession of the land of Canaan was going to be impossible.

In other words, in verses 2 to 7, God is making impossible promises to Abraham. Now comes one of the most significant verses in the Bible, a verse which defines who is and who is not a child of Abraham.

[11 : 45] In verse 6, we read, Abraham believed the Lord and he credited to him as righteousness. righteousness.

The question is this, what makes us right with God? Because after all, that's the definition of righteousness, being right with God. What makes us righteous? What made Abraham righteous? Was it the fact that he left out of the Chaldees in obedience to the call of God? Was it that he welcomed the three visitors to his tent and showed them hospitality? Was it that he rescued his nephew Lot from Sodom?

The question we want to ask in this section is this, was Abraham made righteous by his obedience to the works of the law? Well, according to this verse, Genesis 15, 6, one of the fundamental verses in the Bible, it was Abraham's believing of God's promises that made him right with God.

Abraham is characterized by the righteousness of faith. You see, others before Abraham and after Abraham have lived far better lives.

[12 : 59] They've not tried to pass their wife off as their sister. Abraham did that not just once, but twice. And yet, what made Abraham righteous was not his obedience to the works of the law, but his faith in the promises of God.

As we read, Abraham believed the Lord and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. The true basis of Christianity rests right here.

Listen up. The outpouring of God's grace upon the human race that is not according to our obedience to the works of the law, not by our moral or religious effort, but according to our faith in the saving promises of the living God.

In so many ways, this is the marker between false religion and Christianity. The primacy of faith. That's where Jesus rested his position. In John 3.16, he says, for God so loved the world he gave his one and only son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

[14 : 21] For Jesus, you see, faith was primary. That's where Paul rested his position when in Romans 3.21 and 22, he writes, but now a righteousness from God apart from the law has been made known to which the law and prophets testify.

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. The word justification means to be declared righteous.

And here in this verse we are being taught the scandalous doctrine of justification by faith alone.

That a man or woman is declared righteous by God on the basis of his faith in God's promises and not by his obedience to the works of the law.

That's why Protestant reformers talked of one of the central principles of the Christian faith as being sola fides, salvation by faith alone.

And of course the faith that saves is never alone, it's accompanied by good works, but our salvation as Christians is a function not of what we do for God, but simply our faith in him.

[15 : 44] That's a scandalous truth. A truth so simple that proves too hard for many. It's not your church attendance that makes you right with God.

It's not your moral efforts or your status in society. It's not your religious pilgrimage or your acts of charity. What makes us right with God is faith in his promises.

That great promise that if we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be forgiven and made new. faith in that great promise that if we confess with our mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead we shall be saved.

Believe these promises that the blood of Christ can purify us from all unrighteousness and it will be credited, reckoned to you as righteousness.

You shall be justified before God. So let me ask that question again. What must a man or woman do to be saved?

[16:57] To be justified? To be declared righteous before God? He must believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that what Jesus did on the cross he did for me and that Jesus has done it all.

These are the covenant terms of God that we believe in his son Jesus Christ. Or as John Jesus' closest friend will later say in John 1 verse 12 to all who received him that is Christ to all who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God.

Let me ask you how it is with you this evening. Are you right with God? I'm not asking whether you're a moral person a religious person whether you follow the traditions of your fathers I'm asking you are you right with God?

And if you aren't how can you be right with God? Let me tell you this believe in the Lord Jesus Christ that you shall be saved for as the Bible says from Genesis 15 right to the end a person is justified by God on the basis not of her works but on the basis of her faith.

The grace of condition. And then lastly this evening the grace of cost the grace of cost from verse 8 through 21. On one hand these verses form a gruesome picture of animals being cruelly ripped apart strange dreams and of vultures trying to pick out dead eyes.

[18:49] If it's not gruesome in fact it's grace from beginning to end. And it all happens in response to Abram's question in verse 8.

O sovereign Lord how can I know that I shall gain possession of it? prove to me God that you're faithful to your promises. And there follows something quite remarkable and surpassed in terms of Old Testament theology and the revelation of who God is.

In Old Testament times listen up here Middle Eastern culture was dominated by covenant agreements. So something like this would happen. Animals would be slaughtered cut up and placed in two parallel rows.

Rather than shaking hands on an agreement the two parties would walk down the middle of the rows to cement their covenant agreement.

let's say they were making a treaty about which agreed peace between their two families. So the heads of these two families would walk down the middle of the two rows of slaughtered animals.

[20:07] One there one there and the two heads would walk down the middle. And what they'd be saying by this cultural act is that if one of them should break his side of the agreement that if one family should attack the other family then the aggrieved party is allowed to slaughter the guilty party.

It's almost like as these two people walk down the rows of slaughtered animals they're saying to one another let it be to me as these slaughtered animals if I should break my side of the covenant agreement.

I hope we get this point that in the context of an ancient Middle Eastern culture not our culture where we shake hands on something in the context of an ancient Middle Eastern culture this is the way in which covenants were sealed with the blood of animals and with the sentiment let it be to me as one of these slaughtered animals if I should break my side of the covenant agreement.

Now God is making a covenant with Abram that covenant composed of these promises I will be your God your offspring will be as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sand in the seashore I will give you this land as your possession and now the cultural act which Abram would have recognized from his own culture was taking place whereby that covenant was being sealed with the slaughtered animals and that a gracious act in and of itself is it not that God is providing Abram with more evidence merely than his word he's answering Abram's question how shall I know that I possess it by using a ceremony and a cultural form which Abram can understand but this is where it gets amazing God in the image of the smoking pot and the blazing torch passes down between the two rows and in the language and according to the customs of the day the culture of Middle East the Lord

God is saying to Abram let it be to me as the slaughtered animals if I should break my side of the covenant agreement if I should fail to make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky if I should fail to give you and your descendants the land of Canaan then let me be bloodied and let me be killed and let me be slaughtered as these unfortunate animals and birds you see for us making a promise and then breaking it's no big deal but God would rather be dead than break the covenant he made with Abram in other words the cost of breaking the promise will be the death of God himself yes as surely as God lives Abram will have descendants as numerous as the stars in

the sky and he will possess the land of

[23 : 31] Canaan however impossible these promises seem at this precise moment in time and they are and why is that because God has walked between the slaughtered animals in Genesis 15 let's take it into our age this is no less true that if God should fail on any of the promises he makes any of them he says to us let it be to me as these slaughtered animals that if you should believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ confess your sins and follow him as his disciple and are not saved then God himself will die and that's amazing but there's something even more amazing in Genesis 15 namely that God walks alone between the two rows God walks alone Abram doesn't accompany him as would normally happen if two parties in a covenant agreement in the ancient Middle East were sealing a deal remember these two parties walking down between the lines of the slaughtered animals are saying to each other if I should break my side of the covenant agreement then you the aggrieved party are allowed to slaughter me to kill me and make me like one of these slaughtered animals they're walking and saying to one another let it be to me as these slaughtered animals if I should break my side of the covenant agreement but God walks alone between the two rows Abram's watching him but he's not joining with them the point is there are two sides to this covenant agreement God will keep his side but Abram shall be faithful to his God Abram shall have godly descendants who are faithful to his God and Abram's descendants shall occupy the land of Canaan yes there are two sides of the covenant agreement but there is only one party walking between the two rows and what's happening is that God is saying if I do not keep my side of the covenant agreement then let it be to me as these slaughtered animals but he is also saying by himself walking between the two rows and not

Abram if you do not keep your side of the covenant let it also be to me as these slaughtered animals in other words I will pay the price of your unfaithfulness I will die in your place to atone for your sin I will be slaughtered and ripped apart on the cross on account of your unfaithfulness to my covenant so you see there's a direct line of reference between Genesis 15 and God walking between these rows of slaughtered animals and the cross on which the son of God died it is grace it is scandalous grace that God should keep not only his own side of the covenant agreement but that he should bear my side of the agreement also and bear the cost of my unfaithfulness it seems really isn't it so unfair that God should pay the price for the offense we brought him that he should crush his son in our room and in our stead but that's grace and that's pure grace that me the guilty one is declared righteous and Christ the righteous one is punished on the account of my sin that he should die for me but that's the logic and the genius of Genesis 15 that God himself has borne the cost of our sin through the death of his son on the cross he calls us to believe and to have faith in him and what he's done for us through

Christ on the cross and you know in so doing he changes us he gives us courage to face all of life's challenges so that we need not be afraid that's grace it's from beginning to end grace it's higher than Malmo's turning tower it dominates the skyline of the Bible and the experience of every Christian so my final question for all of us is this is it your experience do you know Christ for yourself we're going to sing now as we close a hymn which expresses words sentiments and the theology of Genesis 15 sin that the blood of Jesus was shed to take away my sin and that as we stand on the merit of Christ we're forgiven and made new my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness let's stand as we sing to God's praise let's thank you