

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Sunday

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 370, 38:2, 381, 396:1-5, 396:6.

Lessons: Genesis 12:1-9, Hebrews 11:1-3 and 8-19, Matthew 17:14-20.

Sermon Text: Genesis 15:1-6.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

We could come up with a number examples of “faith”. We humans have “faith” or “confidence” in a lot of things. We have faith that a bridge won’t collapse when we cross over it. We have faith that a piece of paper with green and black ink on it will continue to be valuable and can be exchanged for things and services we need. We have faith that a particular behavior will keep us healthy.

But today we’re talking about a very special kind of “faith”. This is

FAITH THAT COUNTS FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS BEFORE GOD

- 1. This is a faith that leads to life after death, eternal life.**
- 2. This is a faith that is counted as righteousness before God.**
- 3. This is a faith that comes from God.**

The Bible uses the word “faith” about 260 times in our commonly used translations.

Our text is the fifth time that Abraham, at this time still called “Abram”, is mentioned in Scripture. He is presented in Scripture as an example of faith, including in our Old Testament lesson and in our Epistle lesson.

Abraham believed in God and in what God told him, but he was a sinner. Although he fell into sin again and again, God preserved or restored his faith. He was led back to God again and again when he sinned and repented, but sometimes he had to suffer hardships and difficulties. But God was faithful and reached out to Abraham again and again.

God had promised that Abraham would have many descendants. But when the promise was first made he was 75 years old and his wife was also too old to bear children. At the time of our text he was complaining that he had no children and his servant would inherit everything. Our text tells us: *“Then the word of the LORD came to him: ‘This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.’ He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’”* Then we read the beautiful words: *“Abram believed the LORD.”* That is the kind of faith we are talking about today.

Then the verse goes on: *“and [the Lord] credited it to him as righteousness.”*

So, what is faith? In our Epistle lesson you heard *“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see,”* Hebrews 11:1 (NIV) *“faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”* (KJV)

That chapter of Hebrews goes on to speak of the faith of many people in the Old Testament, and we call those people “heroes of faith”, not because they were people who were great or strong in themselves, but because God worked faith in them, fed and strengthened faith in them and their faith showed itself in actions.

When we speak of faith, the following synonyms come to mind. Words like confidence, trust, conviction, assurance, dependence, reliance.

So what are we talking about specifically when we speak of faith? We include the ideas of not being afraid, having trust in, having confidence in, believing. We are talking about saving faith in Jesus Christ.

I think most of you know about or have even seen examples of misplaced faith, a faith that deceived others or even you. One example is when a magician does some kind of trick that deceives people into believing that what he or she did is really true. Misplaced faith can be believing that someone will say they are going to do something and they don't do it. Misplaced faith can be believing that something is good for you and it turns out that it isn't good for you at all.

The examples I used in the introduction can be set aside as we talk about faith in God and faith in his promises. Scripture before us today doesn't just speak of a simple faith or confidence in something on earth.

When we speak of faith in God, we must realize that the terms about "faith in God" are used in different ways, and yet all are similar.

Faith in God can be faith that God exists. This is believing in God, that there is a God. But to receive all the blessings God wants us to have by faith, we need more than just faith that there is a God. In the epistle of James we read ***"You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder."*** James 2:19 (NIV)

So we need more than that. We need complete confidence or trust in God and in his actions and promises. We must have confidence that what God tells us is really true. We must believe that God sent us his only-begotten Son to earn and give mankind eternal life. That is trusting that Jesus, God's only begotten Son earned all we need. So the term "faith in God" is really incomplete. We should speak of faith that Jesus Christ redeemed me from sin, death, and the power of the devil. This is a faith that leads to life after death, to eternal life.

And so we speak of "Faith in Jesus Christ". This phrase may be used for a saving faith in Jesus Christ, but has sometimes been used to mean just that "there was a good person named Jesus Christ." That in itself does not lead to eternal life.

Saving faith in Jesus Christ is what we are especially talking about today.

This is a faith that is counted as righteousness before God.

Our text tells us: ***"Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness."***

Abraham had difficulty believing God at first. God showed him the stars and told him to try to count the stars and that would be the number of his offspring – his descendants – and not only his physical descendants, but all who would be spiritual children of Abraham. We, even though we may not have any Jewish blood or ancestors, we are spiritual children of Abraham because we believe in God.

Abraham didn't have to earn any righteousness before God. No one does, and no one can. We must rely only on the righteousness of Jesus Christ, his perfection, his sinlessness being applied to us, being credited to us, of us being counted among those who will receive eternal life because of our faith that Jesus Christ earned it all for us.

The Law of God, and we have the summary of God's Law in the Ten Commandments, cannot save us because we cannot obey it perfectly as God commands. The Law shows us our sinfulness. The Gospel shows us our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Because of faith in Jesus Christ, we can expect to be raised from the dead with glorified, perfect bodies, to spend eternity in heaven with Christ. We can expect to live forever, after we die and are buried.

That happens because God counts us as righteous, as good, even as perfect because he gives us the robes of Jesus' blood and righteousness.

All that is ours by faith.

But how do we get faith? How did Abraham have faith? It was given to him by God. He showed that faith, but he also stumbled, as we do every day. But Abraham repented of all his sins and turned to God, just as we do daily.

We learned in Martin Luther's explanation of the Third Article: "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers. On the Last Day he will raise me and all the dead and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true."

Paul tells us in the letter to the Romans: *“That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, ‘Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’ For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’ Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”* Romans 10:9-17 (NIV) *“So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* (KJV)

Faith, too, is a gift from God. And it comes from hearing the Word of God, just as you heard from Saint Paul’s letter to the Romans. Not only does God create faith by hearing his Word, but he feeds and sustains faith through his Word, the Bible. That’s why it is necessary to hear the Word of God again and again and make reading and hearing it a part of our daily lives.

Abraham had opportunity to show his faith when God demanded he sacrifice his only-begotten Son Isaac. God told him to kill his son, from whom Abraham’s countless descendants were supposed to come.

How can we show our faith” In the book of James we read that faith without works is dead. Listen: *“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,’ and he was called God’s friend.”* James 2:14-23 (NIV)

So in Abraham we see an example of saving faith, a faith that leads to life after death, eternal life. In Abraham we see a faith that is counted as righteousness before God, a faith that comes from God.

Lord, give us such a faith as this! Amen.