

## THE PEBBLE IN MY SHOE

Genesis 15:1-6

This week I have been trying a new thing. I've been experimenting with using the speech recognition software on my computer. It's pretty cool and actually kind of amazing. You just talk into a microphone and your words pop up on the screen as part of the document. So, I have a machine that understands human speech! It's not perfect. Every now and then I look at the screen and say, "That's not what I said." I found out that I have to be a little careful. At times I talk to my computer, and not always in complimentary terms. But when I do so, what I'm saying pops up in my document. But as cool as all that is, I found out late in the week that it can do something even more astounding.

Laurie and I are taking care of Toby and Anna's dogs while they are on vacation. The dogs were sitting at the door of my office when another dog walked by outside and they started barking. Suddenly words started popping up on my screen! The software was interpreting the dogs' barking! I was in awe. My computer understands what dogs are saying when they bark! Why isn't this huge news? We have a way to communicate with dogs! Who knew?

There was one little glitch. My computer told me that what the dogs said was, "How how lack ever bat." What did this mean? What were Doc and Banjo trying to tell us? What does, "How how lack ever bat" mean? Is this some sort of dog code? Maybe they're spies!

Obviously, I'm kidding. What happened was my computer totally misunderstood what it was hearing. It misinterpreted what was going on. It occurred to me that in a different way we can do the same thing. There is a being as different from us as we are from dogs. I am referring to God. Actually, the difference between us and God is way greater than the difference between dogs and us. We hear things coming from him and misunderstand him. We misinterpret what he is saying. That happens with one of the most important ideas that God communicates to us. There is a truth that is at the heart of how we are to relate to God. Unfortunately, all too often we hear the words and come up with the equivalent of, "How how lack ever bat." This truth that I refer to comes up in an encounter between God and Abram in Genesis 15:1-6.

### GOD MADE A PROMISE

After the incidents in chapter 14 in which Abram mounted a dramatic military rescue operation to save his nephew, Lot, from enslavement, God suddenly appears to Abram in a vision. His first words to Abram in this vision are, "Do not fear."

There is some disagreement among Bible interpreters as to why God said this to Abram. Some have suggested that after the military operation that we saw in the previous chapter, Abram was afraid of reprisal. Kedorlaomer, he feared, would not take easily the stinging defeat that Abram inflicted on him. He would certainly seek revenge.

This is possible, but my problem with that is I see no evidence that Abram was afraid of the Mesopotamian king. I suspect something else was at work here. When God appears to people in one form or another in the Bible, one of the most common things he says is, "Do not fear." In

Genesis 21:17, when God appeared to Hagar in the wilderness, he said, “Do not be afraid.” When God appeared to Isaac in Genesis 26:24, he said, “Do not be afraid.” When Jesus showed up on a stormy lake in Galilee walking on the water in Matthew 14:27, he called to his disciples, “Take courage. Do not be afraid.” In Matthew 28:10, when the risen Lord confronted the women after his resurrection, he said, “Do not be afraid.” It seems that being confronted by God is a frightening experience, so God leads with, “Do not fear.”

I expect that if God somehow showed up in my life, whether in a vision or in some other form, there would be something about him that would enable me to see that he is not just another guy. There would be something remarkable about him. Whatever that is, I’m fairly certain it would be awesome. Not “awesome” in today’s inflated sense that really means “good,” like when you tell a server to keep the change from the money you’ve given to pay your bill, meaning the server will get a very nice tip and he or she says, “Thank you, that’s awesome.” Awesome in the sense of provoking genuine awe, even fear. This kind of awesome would be more along the lines of the response if you gave the server \$1,000,000 tip. The Bible suggests that if God suddenly should truly show up it would be so awesome that I’d be shaken to my core, just like the disciples were when Jesus came by strolling on top of the surface of a stormy lake. I’m pretty sure my reaction would be the most extreme version of “uh, oh!” I’ve ever had in my life. I am confident that I would need a, “Do not fear” pretty badly. In fact, I think my response to, “Do not fear” would be, “Too late. That train already left the station. In fact, Lord, I’m afraid I need to change my underwear.”

We might think the, “Do not fear” command was because Abram was concerned about being attacked, since God next tells him, “I am your shield.” It sounds like God is promising to protect him. However, I believe that is not the correct translation of the Hebrew text. I think Professor Victor Hamilton is correct when he translates it, “I am your benefactor.” Then he follows this up by not saying, “I am your very great reward,” but, “Your reward will be great.” In other words, God once again is promising to bless Abram greatly.

Abram’s response is both understandable and quite typical of us humans. He says, “What can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” In other words, “That’s nice, Lord, but how is that supposed to matter to me when you are not giving me the one thing I want most?”

In my last year of seminary, Laurie and I went out for dinner on my birthday. I think they should change the Ides of March to my birthday, March 13, because then Shakespeare’s warning, “Beware the Ides of March” would fit perfectly. My birthday many times has been a downer of a day. That day was one of them. The dinner was supposed to be a celebration, but it didn’t go that way. Laurie and I loved each other, and we knew that, but we had reached a crossroads in our relationship. That night, as we discussed it, we came to the conclusion that we had nowhere to go together. We decided that we needed to go our separate ways. I went home that night heartbroken because I loved that girl with all my heart.

Suppose that somehow God had communicated with me that night and told me that he would bless me with a glorious future ministry, or with great riches and success. Any of those things would have felt like a consolation prize at best. “Yeah, uh, that’s real nice of you, Lord, but, um, you do know that’s not really what I want, don’t you? In fact, right now I have to tell you that none of those things really matter much to me.” None of those things could fill or repair the hole that the loss of Laurie created in my heart. In fact, they would have been completely irrelevant to it. They would be as effective in mending that wound as using aspirin to try to repair a broken bone.

That’s exactly how Abram felt. He wanted a child. But he and Sarai had been totally shut out. He was feeling like that was hopeless, that his desire for a child would never be fulfilled. He was even way more depressed than Ralphie in “A Christmas Story,” after he had opened his presents only to discover there was no Red Ryder BB Gun among them. Sure, those other things were nice, but they weren’t what his heart desired.

God responded, “Abram, Eliezer, your servant, is not going to inherit your estate. Your own child will inherit it, because I promise you that you are going to have a son.” He then said, “In fact, go out and look up at the night sky. Count the stars. I’m telling you right now that your descendants are going to outnumber the stars.”

If the Lord did that with me the number of descendants would be far from impressive. In fact, an awful lot of nights it would be zero, because the marine layer blocks them all out. Even on most clear nights we’d probably see 50 or 100 because of the city lights. But from what I can learn from that most unimpeachable source, the Internet, it seems that Abram could probably see 2,000 to 2,500 stars.

That’s a lot of stars, but it’s not all that many. It pales in comparison to the number of descendants Abram actually ended up having. I think this is an illustration. I don’t think God expected Abram to stand outside going, “Uh, okay, let’s see...one, two, three, four...two thousand one hundred ninety-eight, two thousand one hundred ninety-nine, two thousand two hundred. That’s it. Wow, that’s cool. That’s a lot of descendants.” I think the point of this was when Abram looked up in that dark night sky with no ambient light the stars would have made a dazzling display. His reaction would have been, “There’s too many to count!” And the Lord would have said, “Exactly. Now you understand.”

Next came a crucial moment in the history of the human race. Verse 6 tells us “Abram believed God.” Abram said, “All right, that’s good enough for me. If you say it’s going to happen, Lord, I know it is. I know you are going to give us a son because I know that you always keep your promises.” Nothing has changed about Abram’s physical circumstances. There is still no son, and there is still no physical evidence of a coming son. What has happened is God has promised again what he has said before, that Abram will have a son. And Abram said, “I believe you. That’s all I needed. It’s good enough for me.”

**GOD DID SOME DIVINE ACCOUNTING**

God's response to Abram believing his promise was he "credited it to him as righteousness." The Hebrew word translated "credited" meant to "credit to his account." I once went to our bank and deposited an important check using the ATM. Unfortunately, as soon as I hit "deposit," the machine suddenly went blank. It was more than a little concerning. Had it actually credited my account? It hadn't printed out a receipt, or given any indication that my account was credited with the amount of the check. And the bad news was that it had the check somewhere inside its greedy little mechanical body. I went inside the bank and explained the problem. The bank employee said, "Yes, our machines have just gone down." I said, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" He replied that they were working on it, but it would likely take some time. I explained that the machine had taken my check but had not given me any proof that it had actually credited my account. He said there was nothing to worry about it, that they would take care of it for me. I said, "But what if that check amount doesn't show up in my account? What am I supposed to do? I don't have the check anymore because your machine ate it, and I have no receipt to prove that I really did deposit it." He insisted that they would make sure the transaction was satisfactorily completed. There was nothing I could do. I went out of that bank a much less than happy camper. In the end, they did solve the problem and the amount was credited to us.

Abram had an account with God. He's not alone. Every human being has an account with God. Only in this case it is not like a bank account. It's more like the home mortgage account we have through our bank. We owe them money. A lot of money. Imagine if I made a payment on our mortgage and it wasn't credited to our account. That would have several really bad ramifications. God said at that point Abram's account was essentially paid in full. Wait, all Abram did was believe God when he promised to give Abram a son, and said, "Your account is fully paid. You've got all the righteousness you will ever need." That would be like Wells Fargo saying to me they're going to give me a new car and I say, "I believe you. Thanks." And the bank says, "Well, thank you for believing us. Because of that we're going to consider your mortgage paid in full." That would be the deal of a lifetime, wouldn't it? Yet that's what God did with Abram.

That can't be right. It's too easy. Didn't God tell Abram he needed to do something? Didn't he need to be really good, be really nice to people, do some religious stuff? Didn't he need to go to church a lot, pray a lot and give a whole bunch of money, plus be a really good boy?" Or something like that? No, he didn't have to do any of that. God said, "I'm going to give you what you want. I'm going to give you a son." Abram said, "Okay, I believe you. Thanks." And God wrote down in his account, "Totally, 100 percent righteous. His account with me is paid in full."

This was hundreds of years before Moses showed up with the Ten Commandments and all those laws. This was millennia before Jesus would come along. Early in the history of the human race God said, "Here is how you get me to write down 'righteous' in your account. You believe me when I promise you something."

That can't be right, can it? That's way too easy! Yet this is the fundamental truth of our relationship with God. Romans 4:2 says, "If Abraham was justified by works he has something to boast about." If he was declared righteous by God, if he had righteousness credited to his account because he was a really good boy and did some super good and religious stuff, then he could boast

about it. He could say that he was really good, in fact, better than most people. Maybe a lot better. But Paul goes on to say, “But not before God.” He couldn’t boast to God because, on his best day, doing his best stuff, Abram was failing miserably by God’s standards.

Years ago we used to have a church softball team. Several years we were pretty good. We actually won a couple of championships. One year they took all the teams from all the leagues in the area that made their league’s playoffs, and put them in an open post-season tournament. We were our league champion, so we went into this tournament. Our first couple of games we won, so we were feeling pretty good about ourselves. We won our league, we were rolling in the tournament, and we were playing well. Yeah, that’s right, we’re good. We’re kind of a big deal. And then we played - *the Samoan Assembly of God team*. Have you seen Samoan men? These were *large* human beings. And they were absurdly strong. I remember standing out in the field at second base watching them launch home run after home run. It’s really hard to get people out when they keep hitting the ball 50 feet beyond the fence. They ended the game after four innings because there was a mercy rule. We were so far behind, there was no hope of coming back. That team could have beaten us by 30 runs if they had kept the game going.

We found out that there was another league altogether that was way beyond our ability. And so it would have been with Abram if he had tried to get righteousness into his account with God by doing really good stuff. He might have done as good, maybe even better, than everybody else. But he would have found there’s an entirely different league, and in that league he fell way short.

God did this amazing thing and said, “Abram, this is what I want from you. I want you to believe me when I promise something.” Abram did, and God said, “I’m writing down ‘righteous’ in your account.” God does his accounting in ways that are totally different than we typically think. That’s the profound message of this chapter. God’s accounting is utterly different, and that’s really good news for us. Our accounting goes like this: How many answers did you get right on the test? Ninety-five percent? Excellent. You get an A. How many did you get right? Sixty-five percent? Hmm, not very good. You pass, although just barely. How about you, what was your score? Fifty-eight percent? Sorry, you failed. Our problem with that accounting system is that in truth we got exactly zero percent. That’s because, if we could see things through God’s perfect vision, we would be dismayed to learn that on our best day, the best thing we do is actually tainted by what God calls “sin,” and it doesn’t pass the smell test. That’s true of every single one of our answers on the test. Nothing we do actually passes the test, so we end up with a big fat zero. Fortunately, God uses a different grading system, a totally divine accounting system. All Abram did was believe that God would do what he said and give him a son. God told him, “Good, you pass.” Believe God and he says, “I’m putting you down as having righteousness.”

## IMPLICATIONS

### WHO CARES ABOUT RIGHTEOUSNESS?

This is where the misunderstanding shows up. We read "righteousness" and interpret it to mean, "How how lack ever bat." The average person in our society today says, “What’s with you religious

people? You make a thing out of righteousness. I don't care about righteousness. In fact, I think it's a bad thing. You think you're so righteous that you judge other people and look down on them. Frankly, that's worse than breaking your rules, the ones that you think make you so righteous when you keep them. Honestly, most of the time I think your rules are stupid. And I have to tell you that being so righteous makes you about as fun as an IRS audit. You can have your righteousness. I want no part of it."

Our secular friend totally misunderstands righteousness. But he has lots of company because an awful lot of Christians do, too. I'll show you how shortly. Our friend no doubt would be totally shocked to learn that while he doesn't know it, he actually cares desperately about righteousness. In fact, there are few things in life that he cares about more. *Though he does not know it, he really cannot function as a human being without righteousness, and he constantly pursues it.*

At this point you may be objecting that you don't see that at all. We need to understand what righteousness really is. So what is it? The root of the Hebrew word means, "to be straight." You could almost translate it "rightness." In the New Testament the Greek word translated "righteousness" is also translated "justification." If you are justified you are judged to be right. Think of how on your word processor you have the option of having text be left justified, center justified or right justified. That means lined up on the left, center or right. When you are justified, when you are righteous you are lined up properly. You are "right," or approved, judged to be good.

In short, having righteousness means having been judged to be approved. It means being given the stamp of approval. If you watch a cop show on television and a police officer has to shoot someone to protect himself or others it is judged in "copspeak" to be a "righteous" shooting. It is approved. The officer is judged to have done the right thing and thus was "justified."

So typically, religious people think of righteousness as a matter of keeping all the rules, thus being approved, passing the test, being given the stamp of approval. In so doing, we often miss the bigger picture. The bigger picture is this: *Every human being desperately longs to be approved. They cannot stop longing for that sense that who they are is judged worthy; approved.*

Aren't you weary of "Deflategate"? You may not even know what I'm talking about, but it's the whole controversy about the New England Patriots illegally deflating footballs in a playoff game last year to gain a competitive advantage. The controversy over this has been a farce, but it just won't die. It has ended up in federal court and the judge who has the case has expressed annoyance that he is having to deal with such a stupid issue. Why is Tom Brady fighting this in court? Yes, in part it has to do with him not wanting to be suspended for four games, but that's not the bottom line. He could have settled the issue by simply admitting his guilt and getting the suspension reduced to almost nothing. But he's fighting it in court because he doesn't want to be *judged* and viewed as a cheater. He cares about his reputation.

Think about that for a moment. Tom Brady has led his team to six - yes, *six* - Super Bowls. That's more than any other quarterback. John Elway went to five and he's the next closest. Brady has won four Super Bowls, tying him with Joe Montana and Terry Bradshaw for the most Super Bowls. He

is a stone cold lock to eventually be in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He is handsome. He is married to a supermodel who is at the top of her game. Together their estimated net worth is \$410 million. So why does he care what people think?

He cares because he's human, and humans care about being approved, about being justified. We have this sense that no matter how much our society chants the "You just have to please yourself" mantra, that what we really need is approval from someone outside ourselves. We have this sense that our worth and our approval will be measured by someone else. We tie that to people, and we end up wanting to be justified in their eyes. We want to be declared righteous, approved by them.

In their book, "Mistakes Were Made," Carol Aronson and Elliott Tavris expose the prevalence and the danger of our need for justification. They wrote, "All of us, to preserve our belief that we are smart, will occasionally do dumb things. We can't help it. We are wired that way...Our efforts at self-justification are all designed to serve our need to feel good about what we have done, what we believe, and who we are" (pp. 38-39). We are wired, they say, for justification. In other words, we are wired for righteousness. We can't stop ourselves.

Laurie and I had one of those weird little interactions married couples often have. I cannot even remember what we were talking about and exactly what she said, but it was something about going *up* in a context where she should have said going *down*. I said, "You mean 'go down.'" She said, "What?" I answered, "You said 'go up' and you should have said 'go down.'" She said, "No, I didn't." I said, "Yes, you did. I just heard you say it." She said, "Wow, Rick, you're hearing things." And I felt that tug of annoyance, the need to prove I'm right. I could see that she was irritated by my insistence that she misspoke. What is that all about? In the end, we want to justify ourselves. She needed to prove she spoke right; I needed to prove I heard right and she spoke wrong. At its core it's the same thing. It's really about justification. It's about our need for righteousness.

This need to be given a stamp of approval, to have righteousness, is as much a part of us as the need to breathe air. If you are human you have to have air to survive physically, and you have to have righteousness to survive spiritually, psychologically and emotionally. But here's the weird thing: it never goes away. Why is that?

It is because what we need is approval in the final court of appeal. Somewhere down deep inside of us we have an awareness that we need some approval from something outside of ourselves, someone outside ourselves. No human can ever ultimately satisfy our need for righteousness because we have a built-in, unquenchable need for final approval from our creator. Nothing else can substitute for it. When you link that powerful need up with the fact that righteousness is crucial for us both to have a relationship with God, and to have certainty about life after death, it becomes a matter of nuclear importance.

Some time ago Laurie and I went for a walk. Part of the way I noticed some discomfort in one of my feet. I could feel something in my shoe. The rest of the walk that thing annoyed me. I should have just stopped and resolved the problem, but I figured I would just finish it up then deal with the

problem. When I got home I took off my shoe and was amazed at how tiny the little pebble that was the source of the discomfort was. If you have a sense of your unrighteousness even as you tell yourself that you are approved or that you are divine, it is like having that pebble in your shoe. You will always be aware of an irritation that will not go away.

### HOW DO WE GET RIGHTEOUSNESS?

There is a nearly irresistible approach that you will find in every human. It is the natural human default. We believe with all our hearts that we *earn* righteousness. For meat to get the USDA Grade A stamp of approval it must meet the standard. For us to be declared righteous we think we must meet some standard. There are things we must do to earn it, rules we must keep. That's built into us. It's everywhere in our world.

When Jay Leno was still doing his late night television show he used to occasionally go out on the street and ask people questions at random. One night he asked people to name one of the Ten Commandments. The most common answer he got was, "God helps those who help themselves"!

That's not even close. That idea has been around since the time of Aesop and some other Greeks, but it was formulated in those words by a man named Algernon Sidney in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was picked up by Benjamin Franklin who used it in Poor Richard's Almanac. The Quran says, "Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves." The message is that it is up to us to fix ourselves, to work hard and ensure that we finally do meet the standard, whatever it is. We get declared righteous by earning it by proving that we are in fact right, and deserve the stamp of approval we seek.

This approach runs head on into biblical theology. God is holy, meaning perfectly good. So, his standard that we must meet is perfect good. We have not met that standard in the past, we are not meeting it right now, and we will never meet it in the future. The biggest problem is that in our best moments, we don't meet it. Romans 3:20 says, "No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the Law, rather through the law we become conscious of our sin." To be declared righteous is to have righteousness credited to you. We can't do it by keeping laws or rules, by meeting some standards. All the rules do for us is show us how far short we fall.

Another problem with that approach is that trying to live with it is devastating. Kevin Costner co-starred in the movie, *The Bodyguard*, with the late singer and actress, Whitney Houston. She, of course, was an enormously talented singer. But as filming started she was a basket case because she was so plagued by doubts and the sense that she wasn't good enough. After her death Costner said, "The Whitney I knew, despite her success and worldwide fame, still wondered, 'Am I good enough? Am I pretty enough? Will they like me?'" It was the burden that made her great, and the part that caused her to stumble in the end."

This woman was extremely talented, famous, rich and successful. But she could never rest that she was "righteous," that she really did measure up. That insecurity drove her, it is true, to be ever better. But in the end it destroyed her. Living with that need to measure up, knowing we don't, will always destroy us.

God is very much aware of our problem. Because he loves us, he has a plan for us to find righteousness. Romans 4:23-24 says, “The words ‘it was credited to him’ were not written for him (Abram) alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness, for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.” In Philippians 3:9 Paul said that what mattered is to be “found in (Christ), not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.”

Here is what God says: “Trust me, believe me, and I will credit it to your account as righteousness.” That approach has come to fruition in Christ. If we try to establish righteousness by law, which is theological shorthand for “earning it by our efforts,” we will ever live with the pressure that destroyed Whitney Houston, and we will fail. We will never, ever be at peace. We will never, ever be connected to God. And we will never, ever have hope for eternal life.

Abram simply believed that what God promised him would happen, and God said, “Because you believe you are righteous, approved, in my sight, and that’s the only sight that matters.” Now God says exactly the same thing to us, but only when we do just what Abram did. We simply believe God’s promise.

Simply believe. It seems too easy, doesn’t it? It leaves us with a number of questions. Why is faith so important? How can this be fair? We will return to this passage in a few weeks and we will consider those questions. For now, understand this principle, for it is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## CONCLUSION

### BELIEVE GOD

What God supplies is enough. That is the crucial truth in all of life. Believe that in every aspect of life. The moment you fail to believe that, you are starting to rebel against God - and the results *will be bad*. This is a huge, profound truth. It is the heart of the good news of the gospel. You and I are righteous, approved by God, by one thing and one thing only: We believe God’s promise. It is as simple as that.

### REST

Our biggest problem is that we don’t really believe it is that simple. That’s too easy. No, it isn’t. This truth was the most expensive truth in history. *We can believe God for righteousness because of what Jesus did for us*. It doesn’t cost us, but what it cost Jesus is *beyond measure*.

When we fail to believe it is this simple we set in motion a whole bunch of negative dynamics. That one action will lead us to live with doubt, tension, rationalization, fear, and an utter lack of peace. We will drive ourselves to exhaustion and to all manner of hypocrisy to try to prove that we are worthy of approval, all to no avail. We will know we’re failing, so all we can do is mask our failure, become hypocrites and major in self-justification. We will find out all that is wrong with other people, to make ourselves look better.

Here is a truth you need to know: *Until you are settled in the righteousness God gives you by faith, you will never truly be able to love another person, because somewhere in there you desire to justify yourself, and trying to prove your righteousness will block your ability to selflessly care about the other person.*

When we do not rest in the truth of this passage, we become like people who keep trying to make payments on their mortgage when it has already been paid off. When the mortgage has been paid, there is nothing left to pay. God has paid our mortgage for us; now he asks us just to believe him.

When you feel that constant pull to justify yourself, to prove that you are right, that you are approved; see it for what it is and don't give in to it. You are approved by God for one reason and one alone - that you believe God.

When we just believe what God has promised, Jesus said we will find rest for our souls. We will be at peace with God, at peace with ourselves, and that will enable us to be at peace with *us*.

#### REJOICE

Major in reveling in what God has done for you. Do not let a day go by without reminding yourself that God has credited your account with infinite righteousness, as much righteousness as Jesus himself has, and that nothing can ever change that.