**Genesis 15:1-6 (ESV)**

**1** 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.” **2** 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?” **3** And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” **4** And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” **5** 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.” **6** And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

**“Foundation Of Saving Faith”**

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (Galatians 1:3-5). Skeptics are a dime a dozen it seems now days. “Question everything” is a slogan that saturates our culture with one doubt after another. This fits in well when truth is relative to each person, life is simply what you make it, and the Bible is just another religious book among others. Worse than “questioning everything” is that being skeptical has no room for a promise. Marriage, government, church, and other matters are up for question today, but so is the love and faithfulness of God. In other words, the only thing left for a skeptic is to trust self, which never ends up promising for any sinner.

When God called Abraham there was plenty of room for skepticism, because it was only a promise. God told him, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3). Abraham we say is the “Father of faith.” However, faith in our culture many times translates into choice or some kind of personal strength. It removes the idea of a promise and places the work or credit on the person. Saving faith is a gift. Saving faith is what God alone gives. Saving faith is outward trust apart from self. The good news from God is that a promise is a promise making the Gospel our greatest treasure.

The need of God’s promise is always to save. We face this with Abraham in our text, “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.” It seems strange that God speaks such words when Abram had recently returned from saving his nephew lot by defeating the enemy. You would think there was much joy and celebrating. Yet, the Lord knows the heart and pains of those He calls. This man of faith still had fear, felt failure even while finding success, and questioned what He saw of his life. God spoke His promise because there was suffering that Abram could not conquer. God alone stepped forward as his protection. The reward awaiting him rested not in something else to do. Over such a promise, Abraham poured out his doubts and trouble. He said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”

God speaks the same good news for you as promised by your baptism. He brings forgiveness by His Word because fears always abound by the Law while salvation is a promise alone by the Gospel. Luther recognizes the outcome with Abraham is the same for us. He states, “We are reminded of our weakness in order that no matter how great the gifts are that we possess, we may not exalt ourselves but may remain humble and fear God. From those who do not do this He turns His face away, and trouble and perplexity follow.”[[1]](#footnote-1) If the promise made in Jesus were anything else than a promise, then we would just turn inward. The “goodness” of man would take center stage over the depths of our sinful nature. We would look to works for comfort ignoring the truth of what happens in something like In Vitro Fertilization. At last, it would all come to the point of pride questioning God as Lord and Savior. Of course, only the promise saves. It lets us confess our weakness to the One who says, “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

The reason for God’s promise is to give faith in Him. Greater than the problem of barrenness was Abraham did not know if he could bear with trusting God and His Word. So we heard, “And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: ‘This man 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.” God would carry on his family line, but only because it carried an even more promising Savior. The legitimate son Isaac was to see a glimpse of the true legitimate Son of God born of the Virgin Mary who was also a son of Abraham. Looking into the heavens exceeded the dreams of a child in old age, but to the impossible fact of God becoming Man. Jesus later told the Jews, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

Since the promise is from God, man’s reason will never grasp this treasure in Jesus Christ. Man goes even farther than Abraham today to count the stars with much more sophistication. The best guess is 70 sextillion, which is 70 followed by 21 zeroes. Yet, article on astronomy notes, “With the universe as large as it is--perhaps infinitely large--a specific number may prove to be forever out of reach.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Plenty look to life in the universe, when the promise is that in such immensity God made His life known for all by the cross. Just as the Word to Abraham had a sign of heavenly greatness in the stars, Jesus gives us His loving service as witness to Him as Savior. With bread and wine, the Lord of creation, the Savior of sinners, the risen Jesus makes the impossible possible. By His Word, the gift of Himself removes doubt with forgiveness, life, and salvation saying, “take and eat, take and drink.” Jesus promised, “Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.”

The confidence in God’s promise is righteousness on His terms. We hear what that was for Abraham, “And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” He did not choose this faith nor kept it by his strength but God gave it. If saving faith rested on man, man would have no rest being troubled constantly over his work of faith, which only becomes another law. Instead, our Lutheran Father describes this righteousness by faith from God as, “a work of the Holy Spirit, which we are freed from death and terrified minds are encouraged and brought to life…” (AP IV 115). In other words, Abraham did not have anything from within, but it all came from God. This complete reliance gave confidence in the promise of Isaac. More importantly, it revealed another kind of righteousness from God apart from works able to redeem sinners.

By the preached Word and Sacrament God provides us with this same righteousness as a gift. The redeeming work has been accomplished long ago and we had nothing to do with it. The substance of saving faith is then Christ and His Word. He is the righteousness Abraham received and to whom we entrust our lives. St. Paul proclaims, “But the words ‘it was counted to him” were not written for his (Abraham’s) sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Romans 4:23-25). There are plenty of things to pray for over suffering, plenty of things to address for a world in need of redeeming love, and plenty of blessings to enjoy that remain for us at the present. However, none of it justifies or is a lasting salvation. This rests purely on and alone with Jesus. The good news from God is that a promise is a promise making the Gospel our greatest treasure. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting, Amen.

1. Luther, M. (1999, c1961). *Vol. 3*: *Luther's works, vol. 3 : Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 15-20* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Ge 15:2). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.ehow.com/about\_4574345\_number-stars-universe.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)