

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.”² But Abram said, “O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?”³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.”⁶ Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

In a sermon I listened to recently a pastor told this story. He had a young lady in his congregation who was deeply troubled and depressed. She was just fifteen years old. She was a very bright girl. She seemed to have plenty of friends. She was small for her age and could have passed for twelve. She was what we used to call a late bloomer. So the pastor was sitting with her in his office, hoping to understand why she was so sad. He asked her some questions. “Have you sinned against God and have a guilty conscience?” “No,” she replied. “Do you know that Jesus has forgiven all of your sins?” he asked. “Yes”, she replied, “I believe Jesus died for me.” “Is everything alright with your family?” he asked. “Yes,” she said, “I get along with my parents just fine.” Then there was a long pause as he just waited for her to offer some clue on what was making her so depressed. Finally she said, “But what good is all of that when no one will ask me out on a date?”

We all want to laugh at this fifteen year old girl. We want to tell her that life will get a lot rougher before it gets better. We want to tell her that she needs to put her life into perspective and sort out what’s important and what’s not. But haven’t we all fallen into the same trap as this young woman did, where we let someone or something grab up all the room in our hearts so that there was little space left for God?

As we study the First Commandment this morning, we are not going to spend any time at all on gross idolatry. I don’t think any of you have a statue of Buddha in your homes, or some other god that you worship. The kind of idolatry you and I are most likely to be guilty of is the kind of idolatry which gives someone or something so much space in our heart that we leave little room for God. What we want to learn from our study and this story in Abraham’s life is that there is only one thing, one person, one true God that can fill that place in our hearts that belong to God. *“Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus, can my heartfelt longing still.”*

Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus, can my heartfelt longing still!

I shouldn't assume that you all know the whole story of Abraham's life, so let me take a moment to review it. You may be most familiar with the great story in Genesis 22, where Abraham was ready to offer up his son, Isaac, as a burnt offering to God at God's request. God stopped him at the last minute and said, "Abraham, now I know that you fear, love, and trust in me above all things." What a great example of keeping the First Commandment!

But there is a lot which leads up to that story. It starts in Genesis 12, where God calls Abraham and promises to give Abraham a son, who would be the heir of the Savior. Along the way, Abraham made some really dumb moves that showed that he didn't always trust in God above all things. Go home and read Genesis 12-25 and see how Abraham was a sinful man whom God loved and forgave and who brought him along in his life until he became this great man of faith that we know in Genesis 22.

God does one of those interventions in Abraham's life in our text. In Genesis 14, Abraham found it necessary to rescue his nephew Lot, who had moved into Sodom and Gomorrah. A coalition of four powerful kings from the north swept through the land and kidnapped the people along with Lot and his family. Abraham went after them with 318 trained fighting men and rescued Lot and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. It was a smashing victory – a David over Goliath kind of victory.

So what is Abraham thinking when God comes to him in our text? "Sure, I won the battle this year. Maybe I just got lucky. But what will happen when they come back next year and come looking for me especially? What chance will I have? What will come of my life?" And God comes to Abraham in a vision with this wonderful comfort. **"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."** Do you hear what God is saying to his dear child? "Abraham, you don't need anything or anyone but me. I am your shield. I will protect you. You don't need anyone to have your back, because I will always have your back – and your front and your side as well. I am your great reward. You don't need anything but me. Even if your enemies rob you of everything you have, you still have me. I am your God and your Savior. I am the one who fills every longing in your heart!"

And how does Abraham respond to these wonderful words of comfort? **"O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"** ³ **And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."** Do you hear what Abraham says? "I know that, Lord. I know that you are my shield and my great reward, but what good is it, if I still don't have a son who will inherit my estate and carry on my name?"

How do we understand Abraham's longing for a son? Most commentators give Abraham the benefit of the doubt and say that he was concerned about having a son, because God promised him a son **who would be the ancestor of the Savior**. So if he died without a son, what would that mean for his eternal salvation? Even if that was what he was thinking, he was

still breaking the First Commandment because he was not trusting in God above all things. He was getting impatient because it had been ten or more years since God gave that promise, and he and Sarah were not getting any younger.

If this was just a sin of doubt, then Abraham was no different than any one of us, whose hearts are filled with both the faith of our new man and doubts of our sinful nature at the same time. “Lord, I do believe, but why does life have to be so difficult? Why am I always struggling to make ends meet. I know there is food on my table and a roof over my head. But couldn’t you just put a little extra cushion in my checking account so that I wouldn’t have to cut it so close every month? And on top of that there’s a baby coming and my husband just lost his job. How will I get through this all?” Have you ever had one of those moments in life when you didn’t think that trusting in God above all things was enough?

I think that in Abraham’s case, though, we might be too charitable to think it was all about the promise of a Savior. What do you see in the words which Abraham spoke to God? **“O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?”**³ **And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”** I don’t see a reference to the promise of a Savior here. Instead he is worried that his servant would inherit his estate. In that Middle Eastern culture, having a son was so important. It meant almost everything to a man. The son carried on his name. The son was the one who inherited all of his earthly wealth. If you didn’t have a son, you worked all your life for nothing, because it would all just become the property of someone else and go away. “God, I know that you are my shield and my great reward, but what good is it, if I don’t have a son?”

Do you see the subtle shift that had taken place in Abraham’s heart? It was o.k. for Abraham to want a son. But his desire to have a son had gone from an important part of his life to become THE MOST IMPORTANT part of his life. It’s what he thought about every day. It’s why a man who had almost everything found himself sad and miserable. Only God can be the most important thing, the most important person, in our hearts. Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus, can our heartfelt longing still! Nothing can or ever should take God’s place in our hearts.

Have you ever made God take a back seat to the desires of your heart? Did you think that your world was coming to an end because you didn’t make the soccer or baseball team? Have you tried to find some measure of joy in your life by abusing alcohol or drugs? Have you compromised your values or broken one of God’s commandments because you were afraid you were going to lose the person you fell in love with? Did you want to be accepted by your friends so badly that you were willing to go along with their wickedness just to be one of them? Have you convinced yourself that it’s o.k. for you to break one of God’s commandments because “you’re the exception?” Have I convicted you yet?

Alright, then try this one on for size! Have you ever broken any one of God’s commands, perhaps repeatedly in life, because some temptation grabbed your heart? That’s idolatry, too!

Luther began the explanation of every commandment with these words, “We should fear and love God.” The only exception was the first commandment. The point is that every sin is an act of idolatry, a breaking of the first commandment, because we are really telling God that he is not the only one or only thing that holds that special spot in our heart that is reserved only for God alone. *Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus, can my heartfelt longing still!*

Do you want to know something? The good news this morning is that our Savior God is bigger than our idolatry. Instead of bopping Abraham on the head for his lack of faith or his lack of love for God, whichever it was, God instead gives him his promise all over again. **“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.”⁵ 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.”** Picture Abraham sitting out under the stars in the middle of the desert. There is no light in the sky or on the horizon. There were no billboards or houselights lighting up the sky. It was pitch dark except for the sky, which sparkled with millions of lights. And God told Abraham that he was going to have that many descendants.

And one of those many descendants that God promised was going to be a special child, a child of God and child of a woman. We know his name. His name was Jesus. Jesus once told some Jews that didn’t believe in him that Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing his day – he saw it and was glad. Abraham believe that one of his descendants was going to be the Savior of the world – his Savior, too. We have the privilege of seeing what Abraham never got to see. Jesus is our true friend, our hero, our protector, our Savior. Jesus accomplished the one thing that we really long for, the one thing that can fill our hearts with such peace that sin must take a second seat.

What is that? ⁶ **“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”** I would rate this as one of the top five verses of the Old Testament if not the top one. If you here last Sunday, you heard me say from the Bible that there is no one in the world that is righteous before God. Even our righteous acts have to be consider a loss, like garbage. Here God teaches us through Moses in the Old Testament that what Paul taught us in the New Testament was the same thing. Through faith in the Savior to come, Abraham was credited with righteousness.

Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus, can my heartfelt longing still! What is it that you want more than anything else in life? It’s not just to be accepted by your peers. It’s not just to be loved by someone special. It’s not just to fill your life with this thrill or that thrill. What you want more than anything else is to be accepted by God, to be loved by God, to have a home with God. When your heart is filled with the hope that Jesus gives, God will always have a place there – not just a place, but the place that is reserved only for God alone. Amen.