

Christ in Genesis|Hope from the Beginning The Seed of Abraham (3)

Rev. T.J. Campo

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Genesis 15.1-6; Galatians 3.6-19

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." ² Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." ⁴ Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." ⁵ And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶ Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

(Galatians 3) *Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.*
⁷ Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. ⁸ The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." ⁹ So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. ¹⁰ For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM." ¹¹ Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH." ¹² However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM." ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, *having become a curse for us-- for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE "--* ¹⁴ *in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.* ¹⁵ *Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is only a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it.* ¹⁶ *Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ.* ¹⁷ *What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.* ¹⁸ *For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.* ¹⁹ *Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.*

This is the third Sunday in Advent...the season of preparation for the arrival of God by the womb of a virgin – the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

This year, we're looking specifically at the earliest prophecies of this advent of God, the brightest signs and symbols and stories in The Book of Genesis. We've chosen five texts and thus far we've looked at the "Proto-Evangelium" in Genesis 3 ("The Seed of the Woman will bruise the serpent's head") and then last week, the Mysterious Priest, Melchizedek (Gen 14).

Today we look at a foundational premise or tone that rings through the whole Bible and that is God's promise to Abraham and Sarah that He would give them a seed, i.e. a progeny or offspring. And in this seed all the nations of the Earth would be blessed. Genesis 12: "And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; ...in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." (2-3)

The New Testament writers follow their Jewish contemporaries in seeing THIS as the climax of the whole Bible – this is the moment when the solution enters the play. The rest of the Bible is a kind of wrap-up!

Paul takes the Galatian churches BACK to this climactic moment, this resounding theme, in order to say, "See! This is how a relationship with God has always functioned ... so, how IS it that you people have gotten SO sidetracked and missed this FOUNDATIONAL tone, this truth that's fundamental and basic to the dynamics of spiritual life?"

We're going to look at it today as an answer to a major challenge/big question that faces everyone (our favorite topic)...then, we'll see a TWIST in the text...finally, how this helps us actually answer one of life's biggest questions.

The topic/application of this passage that I want to address today (and there are MANY we could take from this text/theme) is the idea of self-image or as it's often called "self-esteem" – the whole big issue of self-knowledge...That's why I called it everyone's favorite topic: ourSELVES... and... yet...maybe it's not your favorite topic...maybe you'd rather NOT think of yourself and MAYBE you feel like you can't stop... but want to...

Maybe you think too highly of yourself...maybe too lowly...maybe you don't know yourself at all.

If I asked you, what is the big problem with self-image...what would you say? People who get stuck ... people who can't seem to MAKE it in life... can't hold a job or get addicted to a substance or a process or get caught up in crime...is it because they have low self-esteem or too high self-esteem?

Several years ago I read a fascinating article in the New York Times by Lauren Slater about this whole sort of mysterious issue of self-esteem... And Slater, who is a psychologist, cites a number of studies that indicate some big problems with our assumptions about self-esteem...namely, that LOW self-esteem is a big contributing factor in people who harm others or themselves. She questions the idea that people who feel good about themselves are less likely to do harm.

She writes *"In part, the discrepancy between high self-esteem scores and poor social skills and academic acumen led researchers like Nicholas Emler of the London School of Economics and Roy Baumeister of Case Western Reserve University to consider the unexpected notion that self-esteem is overrated and to suggest that it may even be a culprit, not a cure.*

"There is absolutely no evidence that low self-esteem is particularly harmful," Emler says. "It's not at all a cause of poor academic performance; people with low self-esteem seem to do just as well in life as people with high self-esteem. In fact, they may do better, because they often try harder." Baumeister takes Emler's findings a bit further, claiming not only that low self-esteem is in most cases a socially benign if not beneficent condition but also that its opposite, high self-regard, can maim and even kill."

They go on to cite other studies showing people who really like themselves (high self-esteem) were more likely to administer an electric shock or a loud blast of noise to a person who could not see them.

Well...if you look the article up online (Lauren Slater, The Problem with Self-Esteem) you'll find IT and find some responses. It will ...though...I THINK...it will make you pause and wonder (the studies tell an important part of the story) IT WILL MAKE YOU QUESTION some of our most dearly held cultural assumptions...about the value of high self esteem.

So... SO...SOOOOO...what? What's a preacher to do in this situation? Are we to say, "See! I've been trying to tell you – our problem is pride! So STOP it! Think low of yourselves... Jeremiah ch 17, 'The heart is desperately wicked!' That's our problem! We think too highly of ourselves!"

Well...as true as that may be...would that help you? I THINK it might be like telling you to stop thinking about a pink elephant... and... now you can't STOP thinking about the pink elephant!

And...even if we DO pay attention to these studies (and I think we SHOULD!) we do have a sense... that there's something to this self-esteem thing... We have to think some way about the self...right?

The unexamined life is not worth living – people with NO self-consciousness are mentally ill...emotionally disabled... At the end of the article, Lauren Slater writes:

This is self-appraisal, which precedes self-control, for we must first know both where we flail and stumble, and where we are truly strong, before we can make disciplined alterations. Self-appraisal. It has a certain sort of rhythm to it, does it not? ... Self-appraisal. If we say self-appraisal again and again, 101 times, 503 times, 612 times, maybe we can create it. And learn its complex arts.

And that's IT...to know ourselves...to rightly appraise ourselves...and learn the "complex arts" (as she says) of self-appraisal and improvement.

Because, even if I tell us, "It's not so much thinking higher or thinking lower...the key is to think

less frequently of yourself...blessed self-forgetfulness (as one friend put it)"...and I DO really think THAT gets closer to what we want... but the question is "HOW?"

And that brings us to these texts – Genesis and its interpretation by St. Paul... Abraham is really on his way to being a kind of self-possessed, self-forgetful kind of person...Last week we saw him in this huge battle and he's cool... amazing composure...but not really emerging from (self-confidence or high-self-esteem) but something else...God is parenting Abraham and God is instilling something IN the man that enables him to respond this way...I think the word is "security" (a great word for PARENTS to learn, BTW, it's not so much self-confidence we want to instill...but a deep sense of security!) AND GOD IS INSTILLING THAT IN ABRAHAM...

"After these things..." – is how Genesis 15 starts – i.e. after this world war (coalition of kings and the horror or war, the FOG of war) and then the words, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great."

YHWH, Lord of the Covenant, re-iterates the promise and despite Abram's insecurities re-assures him...takes him on a field trip: "look up...count the stars...your seed...your children will outnumber the stars..." And under this kind of parenting, this kind of discipling...Abraham becomes secure, "Then he believed in the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to Abram as righteousness."

And Paul, picks up on that very phrase and says to these bewitched (spiritually hypnotized Galatians) who are losing it...leaving the beauty of grace and the freedom and power of the Spirit and sinking back into the RADICAL INSECURITY of dead religion...He says, "Look...Abraham got the promises of God...he saw the stars and heard, 'My son...this is what I will do for YOU...give you descendants...this numerous!'" and Abraham simply rested in that security!...And THIS is how he received blessing...this is how he became secure and accepted by God... "God appraised him righteous... God credited Abraham with a status that Abraham not ACHIEVED...but only received"

So, you Galatians...put away the dumb idea...no, not dumb but CURSED idea that this security, this status, this blessing, this right standing before God is something that YOU MUST DESERVE by being obedient and good enough...YOU WILL NEVER BE GOOD ENOUGH... That's not how Abraham got there and not how SPIRITUAL LIFE functions...not now... not then, NOT ever!

God is LOVE...and to love is to give...God is not a seller but a giver...and WE are not buyers, but receivers... WE ARE ACCEPTED BY GOD BECAUSE GOD MADE A PROMISE...and we simply believe it... we trust him and rest secure in what HE promises to do...

"But", say the Galatians, "we know we have to be good! We know NOT ONLY ABRAHAM but also Moses and we are very...VERY ACCUSTOMED to being good... because God blesses the GOOD!"

And Paul is desperately trying to crack through that trance...that calcified religious shell... "Don't

you see? If you are counting on your being good...if that's where YOUR security comes from...you'll always be deeply insecure and fearful when you fail (which is virtually ALWAYS) and then alternately weird and PRIDEFUL when you succeed (which is virtually NEVER).

You'll invent ways to feel good about yourself (using comparisons...and loopholes...and artificial measurements and self-justifications...and sacrificial acts of kindness/goodness that you make sure everyone can notice and it'll just KILL you when people don't notice...will leave you feeling very insecure and self conscious!)

Don't you see: the way of the Law – i.e. using your “D.I.Y. obedience” and your service and your efforts and discipline to buy God's approval and bolster your self-esteem...is CURSED... but the way of the Promise...which is received by REST...simple trust in the Wildly Generous Father who commits to us – THIS IS THE WAY OF BLESSING...and the deepest kind of security.

And the twist in the text is that the Promise Abraham received by simple trust...The descendants more than he could number...was really...ONE.

All the blessing and security that Abraham craved was not to be found in Ishmael or even in Isaac and Jacob and Jacob's crazy sons... It was all condensed to a single point...a single seed, the True Son of Abraham, Jesus Christ, in whom all the Nations will be blessed. He was born of a woman, born under the Law (the Law that NO ONE could keep) and He kept the Law...and He took the curse the Law prescribed for Law-Breakers... He became a curse for us... “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”.

Here's the real Christmas Tree – Jesus Christ, God born a Child...and trading with us, the Blessing HE deserved for the Cursed Tree that we deserved – all the blessings of God are IN HIM...the one way that God can be known and security received – the Seed of Abraham, the embodiment of all the Promises in Jesus Christ.

Now, what does this whole episode (Abraham believing the promise and Paul applying it to the Galatian's situation) how will this affect this issue of self-knowledge and self-esteem? HOW WILL IT ENABLE A NEW WAY OF LIVING WITH THE SELF?

Well, the first question is really “how does this enables us to live with God?” And the answer is, it helps us relax. It calls us to relax. The previous verses (3.1-5) are the “cruX” of the letter – “One thing, I want to know – DID YOU GET THE SPIRIT by working for Him or by hearing with faith?” ANSWER: of course it was by hearing, receiving, resting, trusting the promise of Good News... AND NOW SAYS PAUL (next verses) why are you going back to religion and trying to act deserving and good? NO! Abraham didn't live that way! True Spirituality has NEVER worked that way! (vv.1-5 = not true to your experience; vv 6ff = not true to Scripture)

So, relax! Simply believe and repent – believe and repent – believe and repent – YOU'LL NEVER BE DESERVING – so learn to live with yourself and with this wonderful paradox – “cheer up!

You're a bigger failure than you think! But in the Seed...in Jesus Christ...you are more wildly loved, cherished, secure, BLESSED than you could ever possible imagine! LOOK UP AT THE STARS! God's love for you is greater because of Jesus Christ! Rest in that...believe.

Second – beware the Law mentality. It's VERY, VERY deeply ingrained that we have to show and prove and demonstrate our deserving! We ALL do it way more than we know. We compete. We boast. We do stuff and then find that we crave to be noticed doing it because we're depending on the recognition of others to feel ok about ourSELVES – that way is cursed. It will only lead to insecurity and greater self-consciousness.

You'll know it when you find these symptoms buzzing around your head – hyper-sensitivity, easily offended, easily annoyed or angered by those bad people around you (thank God you're better than they are!) cultural narrowness (thank God you're better than they are!) easily embarrassed and self-consciousness...very sensitive to criticism or exposure (hold your cards very close – call it dignity – often it's only insecurity)...

And when you see these things you may...no you WILL tell yourself, "I gotta quit this! This annoyance... this fear of people...this hypersensitivity and easily offended thing... and you'll try harder to be a better person – and if you succeed then you'll be in real trouble (on your way to being a moralist)! That's the way of Law and it's a curse.

The way of grace is to say, "Look! Of the Father's Love Begotten...Ere the Worlds began to be...He is Alpha and Omega...He the Source, the Ending He... IN HIM I AM THE DELIGHT OF MY FATHER'S HEART – HE couldn't love me any more than He already does – I am infinitely loved and secure – what could I possibly add to who He is and what He has done?"

When you rest in that, see how the opinions of people mean less...mean nothing...how EVEN what you think of YOURSELF...means nothing...see, how that blessed self forgetfulness begins to break in... and joy and freedom and generosity begin to break out!

Let's pray.