
What is Righteousness?

**An article for *The Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler, *Dean of the Cathedral*
January 26, 2025**

"Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). It is one of the great verses of scripture. But, we tend to think of that statement as a form of divine legal transaction. Tradition has taught us that somehow Abraham "believed the right way," and thus the legal and formal transaction was made valid. He would receive progeny and land.

But I think otherwise. That is not, that is NOT, what righteousness means. Throughout the Bible record, from Genesis to Exodus, from the prophets to Jesus, and certainly to Paul, I have found a healthy definition of "righteousness" which does not mean legal justification or legal standing. The better definition of the word "righteousness," the holy definition, is "relationship." "Righteousness" really means "right relationship."

"Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as relationship." That's what belief does for us, too, and it is what faith does for us. Good belief is not simply reciting the correct formula or the correct creed. Good belief puts us into good relationship. Good faith puts us into right relationship. It is right relationship that means righteousness for us.

Sure, land and descendants feel good. But there are people in this life for whom the material and objective signs of success do not occur. People who lose their land. Couples who cannot have children. Couples whose children die too soon. These are some of the inevitable features of life. Sometimes life serves us wonder and delight – and land and progeny. But sometimes life serves us sour wine indeed.

There is one salvation in life, one thing that gives us hope; and it is not land or descendants. And it is not a legal standing of righteousness, or some kind of legal transaction that gives us hope. The true salvation in life is relationship. To believe in God is to be given relationship. My interpretation of Genesis 15:6 is that Abraham believed God; and, thus, he was given relationship.

Even people with no children at all can teach us much about relationship. That is what Harper Lee, who never had children, taught us in her book, "To Kill A Mockingbird." She taught us right relationship. In the 1962 movie version of that book, Atticus Finch tells his daughter Scout this, "I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what."

Abraham believed God even when he knew he was licked, that he was too old, that he was hopeless. It is his belief, his faith, that continues after him. That's why Saint Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, could say that every person of faith is a child of Abraham, whether that person is blood-related to Abraham or not, whether that person is religion-related to Abraham or not!

Abraham's contribution to God's kingdom is not the children he sired; it is the faith he chose. Those who believe like Abraham, even when life looks hopeless, are the descendants of Abraham. The rituals that genuinely commemorate that event are those that draw us closer to God, and those that draw us closer to each other. The rituals of true holiness are those that remind us of relationship.

The great promise of God, then, is not land or descendants. The promise of God is relationship. Holy relationship. Abraham believed God, and it became relationship for him.

/

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*