

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Scandal of Jesus' Beautiful Gospel

What a Gift!

(Genesis 15, Romans 4, John's Gospel)

Study #1

Introduction: Scandalous...

Did you hear about the recent scandal involving...? (yawn)

There is news of scandals everywhere. Daily, we hear of scandals in politics, sports, and in the world of entertainment. And, as if there weren't enough scandal on TV already, there's the series.

And there is no shortage of scandal in the religious world. This Christian organization reels from a financial scandal. That Christian leader resigns over a moral scandal.

Sure, Christians often display grace and beauty. But it isn't exactly shocking to hear of messy scandals in the church. And you're probably not all that surprised to see "scandal" coupled with Jesus' Gospel in the title for this series of messages.

For the next three Sundays, we are going to take a look at the essential Christian message together. We call that message "the Gospel" (the word means *good news*) and it is the message that tells us how to get right with God.

We'll be zeroing in on some aspects of the Gospel that have, sometimes, been considered scandalous.

For this first week's journey into scandal, we'll be thinking about the way the Gospel of Jesus, when it's working the way it's supposed to work, *contrasts* with the way the world works when it's working the way it's supposed to work.

The Gospel of Jesus tells us how we can be eternally saved. And to grasp how His Gospel works to save us - to understand how God has always brought people to salvation - we'll turn to a story.

Our first Gospel scandal takes us to the story of Abraham, the father of the Jews. He lived four thousand years ago, but big chunks of his story link the ancient world and our modern world.

What Abraham's Life Says About Getting Right with God

Meet Abraham

The backstory and heritage of Abraham

Abraham was born in the city of Ur in the land of the Babylonians.¹ The culture of the Babylonians and of his city, Ur, was very advanced in art and architecture, trade and education.

But it was also very much given to the worship of false gods, and Abraham's family was involved in its idolatry.

Actually, there is no reason to doubt that Abraham, himself, was also a worshiper of the gods of Babylon.² And with nothing special to commend him, God blessed Abraham and chose him to play a role in His plan to bless the world.

We find the first statement of that blessing in Genesis 12, in what we refer to as the Abrahamic Covenant.

The promise given to Abraham (Genesis 12)

¹ Referred to as "Chaldeans" in his day.

² There is debate about this, but I am more drawn to the idea that Abraham naturally followed in the footsteps of his father, Terah, who we know worshiped idols (Joshua 24:2) until God (Yahweh) revealed Himself to Abraham.

**[1] Now the Lord said³ to Abram
 “Go forth from your country,
 And from your relatives,
 And from your father’s house,
 To the land which I will show you;
 [2] 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;
 [3] And I will bless those who bless you,
 And the one who curses you I will curse.
 And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”**

God repeated this blessing several times during Abraham’s life.⁴ Each time, God promised Abraham that he would inherit the land of Canaan, that he and his wife, Sarah, would have a son, and that a nation would come from that son.

As commanded, Abraham moved to Canaan, where he showed himself to be a really good man.

Good Abraham’s good life in Canaan

Upon entering the promised land, his first act was to build an altar to God. He was inviting his new neighbors to join him in worshipping the one, true God.

And then, not content to simply worship God, Abraham **“called upon the Name of the Lord.”** (or, better **“called out - PREACHED! - in the Name of the Lord.”**)⁵

He moved north and south through Canaan, setting up altars and telling those who were far from God about the goodness of God.

We also see in Abraham great generosity. For instance, he allowed his nephew, Lot, to live in the best part of the land of his inheritance (which just happened to be the lush grazing area around Sodom and Gomorrah).

Then, later, showing great family loyalty, Abraham went to rescue Lot after Lot had been taken captive by some marauding kings, risking more than three hundred of his own men to bring Lot back.

And, there was Abraham’s worshipful meeting with the priest of “God Most High”, Melchizedek.⁶

I’m not trying to say that Abraham was perfect. Not at all. In fact, he was guilty of a couple of scandalous messes.⁷ But, on balance, I would say that the scales of moral goodness tilt in Abraham’s favor.

Deeds such as Abraham performed are the kinds of deeds that we might think would commend someone to God, might get him in good with God, might even make him right with God.

Abraham did get right with God, but it was in an entirely different way than by measuring up as a good man, as a later part of his story makes clear.

Abraham and God (Genesis 15)

God re-promises

When we catch up to Abraham in Genesis 15, we find him at, I believe, an all-time low.

He was thinking about the reality that he and Sarah were still childless, after ten years of waiting for the son God had promised them.

³ Literally, **“had said”**, since by the time this command came to Abraham (Abram at this point; his name was changed to Abraham much later) he had already left his country and was living in Haran.

⁴ At chapters 13, 15, 17, 18, and 22.

⁵ Genesis 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 22:14.

⁶ His name means “king of righteousness” (Genesis 14)

⁷ Remember that he twice tried to deceive rulers of the land in which he lived - first, the Egyptian Pharaoh; then Abimelech, king of Gerar - by telling him that Sarah, his wife, was really his sister, so that he would be safe in case any of their people wanted to take her as a wife. (Yes. That’s despicable.)

It was at this time, when Abraham was eighty-five and Sarah was seventy-five, that God spoke to this good man in a vision.

[15:1]...“Do not fear, Abraham, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.”

In other words, “Yes, Abraham, I know. You and Sarah are past child-bearing years and the nursery is still empty. But, I promise. She will bear you a son. Will you trust Me?”

Abraham wonders...

Listen to Abraham’s response and you’ll see that he was struggling. Rather than give God an immediate “Sure, Lord. I trust You.”, he’s thinking of a Plan B.

In those days and in that culture, if a husband and wife had no direct heir, their wealth would go to one of their hired servants - a perfectly fine arrangement for that day.

That’s why Abraham said, [3]...“**Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.**”

But you can hear an accusing tone in those words. “Lord, You promised. This is not what You said would happen.”

If you’re amazed that Abraham spoke so boldly to God, you may be even more amazed that God seemed to appreciate the honesty. (God always appreciates it when we are honest with Him.)

God confirms the promise

[4] Then, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “This man (Eliezer of Damascus) will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.”

God could not have been more clear. He is **still** promising that Abraham and Sarah will have a son. This is the “good news” to Abraham. This the Gospel to Abraham.

Now, this whole scene was being played out at night. So, without waiting for Abraham to respond, God spoke again: “*Abraham, step outside your tent. I want you to see something.*”

Once outside, God told him to look up. Count the stars. And we can just imagine the scene.

On some nights here in San Antonio, we can see lots of stars. In fact, these days, if you look to the southern sky in the early morning hours, you can see Mars.

But if you take a trip out to West Texas - an area very similar to where Abraham was - the night sky lights up with a billion stars.

Of course, the point here is not astronomy. It’s biology. Abraham’s descendants - from him and Sarah - will be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Hear Abraham’s response.

Abraham’s faith, God’s justification

[6] Then he believed in the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

This is faith. Not childish. Childlike. He simply took God at His simple, straightforward word.

And God was so pleased with Abraham’s faith-filled response that He rewarded Abraham with “righteousness.” (or, we would say, justification, salvation)⁸

This is fascinating.

Abraham did lots of things that I would consider more meritorious than stepping outside of the tent late at night to look at the stars, and believing God’s promise.

⁸ That is “justification” or “salvation.”

But nothing he had done prior to this resulted in God declaring him righteous.

- When he built altars throughout Canaan, worshipping and preaching, God didn't justify him.
- When He gave Lot the pick of the land, God didn't make any commending comment at all.
- After Abraham went out on the search and rescue mission for Lot, God didn't say, "Now, you are justified."
- God didn't justify Abraham after he met Melchizedek and worshiped.

It was not Abraham's obedience that saved him at all. It was his trusting response to God's "good news" promise that justified him.

And Abraham's story from 2,000 BC is our AD 2018 story.

Now, let's fast-forward to the New Testament. When the Apostle Paul was writing to tell Christians in Rome about justification before God, he told Abraham's story - the story we've just seen.

Paul pointed out the difference between the way God works and the way the world works.

Abraham and You (Romans 4)

[4] Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.

When you get a paycheck at the end of a pay period at your job, you may say, "Thanks", to your boss. But if you do, you are just being polite.

You don't actually think that your employer is doing you a favor when you get paid. You worked. Your wages are nothing other than what you have coming to you.

That's the way the world works. It's the way the world should work.

If you were to present your work to God and ask payment for that work, God would give you the payout for what your work merits.

But, you won't really like that arrangement, because your good works will never merit justification. We have all sinned and our work always merits condemnation.⁹

However, if we give our trust to the Lord, if we will believe His "good news" promises, He will reward us with the gift to end all gifts, the gift of righteousness. He justifies us. As Paul goes on to say,

[5] But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.

Scandalous.

My dad used to remind me, regularly, that there are no free lunches in life. That was his way of telling me to work hard.

And he was right to urge hard work. It would be scandalous if someone were to receive a full day's pay without having put in a full day's work.

You who are parenting the next generation are doing well to teach your kids to work hard and to be industrious. Way to go! By and large, people work for what they get. That's the way the world works.

But this part of how the world works doesn't work with God. Works never work to get us right with God.

What God was looking for from Abraham is exactly what He is looking for from you and me.

God's "good news" Gospel to Abraham and the Gospel of Jesus to us both say that it's not what we do that makes us right with God.

⁹ The point of Romans 4 is to show that this has always been the way God saves people. It has never been based on works. It is now and has always been based on faith.

It's believing that God will give us what He says He will give us and that He will do what He says He will do.

It's all about faith.

When God sees your faith, He saves you. Salvation is not a matter of getting what you deserve. Receiving forgiveness of sin and eternal life is not your wage for being good. Eternal life is a gift.¹⁰

Abraham received God's gift by faith. And you and I receive the gift Jesus offers us by faith.

One of my first exercises in study this past week in preparing for today's message was to review and to read the Gospel of John.

I did that because John's Gospel is the one book in the New Testament that claims to be written explicitly so that people would know all they need to know to have eternal life.

Near the end of the book, John tells us why he has written these twenty-one chapters about Jesus. Here is his purpose statement.

[John 20:30] Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] but these have been written so that you may BELIEVE that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that BELIEVING you may have life in His name.

I have read John's Gospel many times over the years. But it has been some time since I've read it at one sitting. And reading it all the way through, it is impossible to miss how central is the theme of faith in Jesus, belief in Jesus, trust in Jesus.

As I paged through John's Gospel, I got real excited because the story we read in John aligns perfectly with what we have just seen in the story of Abraham.

What God is looking for from you and me is faith, as John says over and over and over again.

What John's Gospel Says About Getting Right with God

The Centrality of Faith

In the opening Prologue to the Gospel, when describing the ministry of John the Baptist, it was all about faith.

[1:7] He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might BELIEVE through him.

Early in His ministry, Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding in the village of Cana. John tells us what was the point of that miracle.

[2:11] This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples BELIEVED in Him.

A short while later, when Jesus cleaned out the temple in Jerusalem, clearing it of those who were buying and selling, the disciples didn't exactly "get" the point. They did later, though. (2:22)

But after that cleansing, which was during the Passover feast, we hear the refrain, again - ***[2:23]...many BELIEVED in His name, observing His signs which He was doing.***

Once, Jesus had a night-time conversation with a renowned Jewish rabbi, Nicodemus. After speaking about being born again, Jesus made reference to a story from the Old Testament to drive home a point. (that happened a lot)

The story was about a time when the Jews rebelled against God in the wilderness. To discipline them, He sent a plague of poisonous snakes into the camp.

¹⁰ And I'm not adding the adjective "free" because "free gift" is redundant. A gift is, by nature, free. If it isn't free, it's not a gift.

To stop the plague, God told Moses to place a serpent made of bronze up on a standard so that whoever looked at the serpent (nothing more than look!), would be healed of their snakebite.

To Nicodemus, looking ahead to His own death on the cross, Jesus said, **[3:14] “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; [15] so that whoever BELIEVES will in Him have eternal life.**

Then there was the time when Jesus and His disciples traveled through the region of Samaria.

At a well near the village of Sychar, the Lord shared “good news” with a needy, mess of a woman. She believed and her testimony had a belief-centered effect on the Samaritan villagers where she lived.

[John 4:39] From that city many of the Samaritans BELIEVED in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, “He told me all the things that I have done.” [40] So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. [41] Many more BELIEVED because of His word; [42] and they were saying to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we BELIEVE, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world.”

Another time, Jesus healed the son of a nobleman who lived in Cana of Galilee, long distance and sent the man home to check on his recovered son.

[4:53] So the father knew that it was at that hour in which Jesus said to him, “Your son lives”; and he himself BELIEVED and his whole household.

After the feeding of the five thousand, the crowds kept after Him, hoping to see more miracles. Jesus told them to stop seeking signs and food, but to “**work**” (interesting choice of word) for the food that endures to eternal life.

When these crowds asked what sort of “**work**” Jesus was referring to, He said, **[6:28]... “This is the work of God, that you BELIEVE in Him whom He has sent.”**

And at another Jewish festival called Tabernacles, on the last, great day of the feast, **[7:37]... Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. [38] “He who BELIEVES in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.’”**

Some time later, Jesus healed a man who had born blind. This man got crosswise with the religious rulers who found fault with Jesus for performing a miracle on the Sabbath day. The formerly blind man defended Jesus, so these guys excluded him from the religious life of the community (they excommunicated him). Then we read this.

[8:35] Jesus heard that they had put him out, and finding him, He said, “Do you BELIEVE in the Son of Man?” [36] He answered, “Who is He, Lord, that I may BELIEVE in Him?” [37] Jesus said to him, “You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you.” [38] And he said, “Lord, I BELIEVE.” And he worshiped Him.

Not long before His own death, a good friend, Lazarus, died. Jesus went to the village of Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead.

Before He got to the tomb to perform this miracle, one of Lazarus’ sisters, Martha, was speaking with Jesus. He made a claim about Himself and then asked her a question.

[11:25] Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who BELIEVES in Me will live even if he dies, [26] and everyone who lives and BELIEVES in Me will never die. Do you BELIEVE this?”

[27] She *said to Him, “Yes, Lord; I have BELIEVED that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.”

After Lazarus was raised from the dead, John went out of his way to point out that this miracle “worked” as intended.

[11:45] Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, BELIEVED in Him.

And on that first Easter Sunday morning, after Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and found it empty, she returned to tell Peter and John, who then ran to the tomb to see for themselves.

John, the author of the book, describes the impact of seeing Jesus NOT there. Not surprisingly, the effect was faith.

[20:8] So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and BELIEVED.

And these are just a few of the examples from John's Gospel of the centrality of simple faith in Jesus for eternal life.

There are more than twenty-five more passages in John's book where simple trust in Jesus is highlighted as EXACTLY what was called for, EXACTLY what God was looking for.¹¹

And, then, there are these simple invitations to simply believe in Jesus.

Invitation

[1:12] But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, [13] who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

[3:18] "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

[3:36] "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

[5:24] "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

[6:47] "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.

[10:37] "If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; [38] but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father."

And let's not forget this:

[3:16] "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

Conclusion:

As the song, "Be My Escape" (a song written and performed by Reliant K) puts it, "The beauty of grace is that it makes life not fair."

We don't get what we deserve - condemnation - and we get what we don't deserve - eternal life - as a gift when we believe in Jesus.

The scandal of the Gospel is that eternal life is free to us because Jesus paid it all. Beautiful.

¹¹ See 1:47-51; 5:37-38; 5:44-47; 6:63-64; 6:66-69; 7:3-5; 7:30-31; 8:23-24; 8:28-30; 10:25-26; 10:40-42; 11:11-15; 11:40; 12:9-11; 12:35-36; 12:37-46; 13:19; 14:1, 10-12; 14:29; 16:8-11; 16:23-28; 16:29-30; 17:20-21; 19:31-35; 20:24-25; 20:26-29.