May the Lord of all be with you.

*But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.*

Matthew 6:3-4

*Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.*

Matthew 5:16

Jesus tells us to do things in secret; giving and fasting are two examples. He also tells us to let our Christian light shine before men. At first glance, these two commands seem contradictory. So, how do we handle this.

One of the main starting points of Bible interpretation is that the Bible does not contradict itself. If we start there, we know that there has to be some other explanation.

In combining the ideas expressed in these two verses and also looking at the surrounding context (also very important in Bible interpretation), we can see what is going on. There are some things that we do in secret. We do them in secret so that it is only between us and God. If we do these things in public, it is for attention and in order to receive praise from other people. In this case, we are doing things for our own glory, not for God’s.

Then there is living our lives in general. There are certain things we do as Christians whether someone else is watching or not. Jesus told us not to hide our light under a basket. In this case, we are loving our neighbors, and hopefully others will see and give glory to God. Our actions of goodness and kindness for God’s sake, will attract others to Christ and build His Kingdom.

Our motive is key. Do things for God as His servant. If in secret, great. If others must see, may they be brought into a right relationship with Christ for salvation.

In Christ’s love

John

10-2-22

Genesis 15:1-21

Abram has just been through quite a bit. After his nephew, Lot, had been taken captive along with the population of the five cities of the valley, Abram gathered his men and with the help of some allies, chased down the raiding army for a distance of almost 150 miles, and defeated them. He brought back all the people and their possessions. He resisted the king of Sodom’s offer to enrich himself by keeping all the booty. His motive had been strictly honorable; to rescue Lot.

Abram also met the priest Melchizedek, king of Jerusalem, whom he recognized to have great importance regarding the God of the Bible. Abram presented Melchizedek with tithes which were a thank offering to God. All of this was a foreshadowing of Jesus who is the true priest-king of Jerusalem, and of all nations.

Chapter 15 begins with “*After these things*.” So, after dealing faithfully and bravely with all these things just discussed, Abram has a conversation with God. This interaction with the Almighty begins as a vision and progresses to several actions. Yahweh comes to Abram and gives him reassurance:

*“Do not fear, Abram,  
I am a shield to you;  
Your reward shall be very great.”*

How precious it is that our almighty Lord would begin by comforting Abram. More than once in the Bible, God begins this way when He wants to offer comfort and encouragement. But what did Abram have to fear? There are a few possibilities or even a combination of them. First, here Abram is confronted by God. This is some sort of vision and he is facing the all-powerful Deity; I can imagine being afraid.

Secondly, he had just attacked a coalition army from the east. It would be reasonable to think that those nations and even more of their allies might come back to retaliate. And thirdly, Abram has followed God who had given him promises. So far, he hasn’t seen those promises or even the possibility of them coming to pass. He’s had lots of time to think and wonder when they were going to take place. Abram has believed God, but that nagging doubt that haunts all of us in this fallen world was there.

So, God tells Abram not to be afraid. He will be a shield to him; in other words, God will protect him. Abram needn’t worry about armies coming to attack him or any other marauding forces harming him. And God lets him know that he will receive his reward; he will receive the promises God has given him. Abram has been clinging onto these promises for years; asking God nothing. Now Abram asks God two questions.

I think sometimes when we read about someone in the Bible asking God questions, we cringe. There are several accounts of someone asking God about what He says and God becomes very angry. It is even called tempting the Lord; something we definitely want to avoid. But sometimes, like in the present case, God simply answers the questions. How do we deal with this? What is the difference?

It comes down to the motivation of the heart. It depends on whether the question is asked in faith or in unbelief. There is a difference between asking in order to understand and asking in order to challenge. Any question asked in unbelief is a challenge.

Verse 6 is crucial in this exchange between God and Abram. “*Then he believed in the LORD*.” Abram is struggling; he believes God, and importantly, he wants to believe God, but the doubt is creeping in a little. He just wants some assurance. He hasn’t seen the promises start, and he and Sarai are getting older; they are childless and don’t own a square foot of land. His mind is in turmoil and he wants to understand; so he asks.

What a chance for comfort this offers to us. We, like Abram, are waiting for a promised land; and we, like Abram, won’t receive it until we die. That is a hard thing for us and sometimes, doubts creep in. There is a fight going on between our flesh that demands something tangible to touch and hold onto, and our spirit, that has been made alive in Christ and believes what He has promised us. We are caught in the middle of that fight.

We resist those doubts, and that is what we should do. But at the same time, we need help. It is okay for us to go to God in prayer, and tell Him about the doubts we are having. He knows about them anyway, so we might as well confess them. We won’t be telling Him anything He doesn’t already know. But if we can be open with God, our relationship with Him will grow stronger; in return, He will then be able to offer us comfort like He did with Abram.

In Mark chapter 9 is the story of the boy possessed with a deaf-mute spirit. The father begs Jesus for help, if He is able. Jesus admonishes the father, saying that faith is what will make deliverance for the boy possible. The father replies in deep heart-felt honesty, “*I do believe; help my unbelief*.” He is facing the same tug-of-war that Abram faced; and that we face. God knows our hearts are evil, but He is kind and caring when we reach out to Him for strength and help and understanding.

Abram’s first question is, “*O Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” “Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.*” Abram is respectful in his question. He refers to God as “Lord Yahweh” or “Master Yahweh”. Then he acknowledges that children are a gift from God; that the blessing of children comes from Him. He explains what is troubling him; because he has no children, all he has will go to one of his servants. This was the way things were in the Middle Eastern culture of the time.

God answers his question very directly. Eliezer will not be his heir. Abram will be the biological father of a child and this child will be his heir. To reenforce this, God has Abram go outside and look at the stars. This would have been a view of the sky when there were no other lights from earth obscuring the view. I hope you have all experienced seeing the night sky from an area far from any cities or towns. It is amazing how many stars you can see.

With this dramatic visual, God tells Abram that his descendants will also be innumerable. As verse 6 tells us, Abram believed Him. That belief was credited to Abram as righteousness. Here in Genesis 15:6, we see another hint of the Gospel message. When Moses wrote this, it was letting the people know that faith was the key to salvation and right standing with God.

The Old Testament saints received salvation through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, and that salvation was applied to them because of their faith. Abram was counted righteous before God because of his faith; but it was Jesus who paid the price for Abram’s sins. It is the same for us now; Jesus has paid the price for our sins, if only we will accept Him in faith. It is important to note that Abram’s works did not justify him; it was his belief; and it is the same for us.

Next God makes a declaration, “*I am Yahweh*”. Our Lord begins many of His statements this way; it reminds us that what is being said is from the almighty creator God of the universe and heaven. What He says goes; what He says is true. He reassures Abram that He is the One who brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans; brought him out of paganism. And the Lord has brought him here in order to give him this land.

Abram asks his second question, “*O Lord God, how may I know that I will possess it?*” Again, Abram is respectful in his address. He believes God but doesn’t understand. He has walked the length and breadth of the land and it is a large land. He still has no children and it will take many people to inhabit this land. How can all these things be?

God tells Abram to bring the animals. This is something Abram understands. This is a covenant ceremony that was common in this part of the world at this time. When two parties made an agreement, the animals would be cut in half and those in the covenant would walk between the pieces. This was a visual expressing that if either party in the covenant violated the covenant, they would be made like the animals. This was a very graphic visual and would have a deep psychological impact.

Abram prepared the animals for the ceremony and stood guard over them throughout the day; again, waiting. As evening came, a supernaturally deep sleep fell upon Abram and he was overcome by terror and great darkness. Both of these conditions show up other places in the Old Testament to indicate the presence of God. This would have had a profound effect on Abram. Next, God solemnly gives him prophetic details. As we read the rest of the Old Testament, we see that each of these prophecies came to be.

Abram did indeed have descendants and they ended up in the land of Egypt. They were there four hundred years. By the end of the 400 years, they were heavily oppressed and abused. Notice in verse 14 that God will first judge the nation and then the people will come out of it. This judgement came upon Egypt in the form of the ten plagues and the destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. Each of the ten plagues showed God’s power and superiority over the gods that Egypt worshiped.

As the people of Israel left Egypt, God told them to ask the Egyptians for goods; and God moved the Egyptians to be very generous with the people. In this way, Israel actually plundered Egypt when they left. Verse 15 also came to pass; Abram was 175 years old when he died. The way this verse is worded is a little different from what we usually read. Normally it is phrased “gathered to his fathers”; here God tells him that he will “*go to your fathers in peace*”. There is an indication here of the afterlife; that Abram will live on even after he passes from this life.

Finally, God lets him know that his offspring will return to this promised land; they will possess it. Through his progeny, Abram will have the land. It’s important to know that what God is having the children of Abram go through is not punishment. It is the way God chose to develop the nation. Hardship is often the best teacher; and this applies to us.

Our wise God allows hardship in our lives in order to bring us closer to Him and shape us like Jesus. It is up to us how we react to hardship. We can rage against it and have our hearts become hard toward Jesus. Or we can turn to God in trust and allow the hardship to soften our hearts and bring us closer to our Saviour.

Although the people of Israel became slaves in Egypt, it was a time where they were kept safe from other nations. During these 400 years, they were able to become the mighty nation that eventually came out of Egypt. God used the pagan nation of Egypt for His own purposes, and they were judged for their sins and idolatry.

But there is also something special about Egypt. In the book of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 19, he speaks of the calamity that is facing Egypt in the future. Egypt is in for a very difficult time. But then in verse 22 it says, “*The Lord will strike Egypt, striking but healing; so they will return to the Lord, and He will respond to them and will heal them.*” Somehow, sometime, Egypt will turn to God through Jesus Christ. We will have to wait and see.

There is another important part of verse 16, “*for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete*.” Amorite is a short way of saying all the people of the land of Canaan. This is shown when God lists all the nations in the last three verses of this chapter. The people of this land are sinful godless people and God’s judgement will fall upon them. But God is still giving them over 400 years to repent. He knows that they won’t, but He is merciful God and He gives everyone the biggest possible chance.

We learn from this that while God is extremely merciful, His patience has a limit. There will come a time when the end will come and God’s wrath will rain on those who refuse Him. Examples of this take place in the physical world. We all know what is coming for Sodom and the cities of the valley. We know that when the iniquity of the Amorite is complete, that God will bring His judgement in the form of Israel. This is why God commanded His people to completely destroy all the people of this land.

And all this that takes place in the physical is an example, a foreshadowing, of what will take place in the spiritual. Those who turn to God through Jesus will be forgiven and receive eternal life. Those who persist in their rebellion will receive the full wrath of God in everlasting destruction. How good it is to have received Jesus Christ in faith. In Him, we can face all that comes upon us knowing that God is our shield and that our reward will be great.

Prayer

Merciful Lord, Your graciousness is shown throughout Your word. Your graciousness is shown by Your living Word, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus. We are so grateful to You; You have made a way for Your justice to be satisfied, yet we can be forgiven our sins. It is all in the work of Jesus on the cross.

In Him, we know that we are ultimately safe; we know that any hardship we face will work out for our good, and make us more like our Saviour. Thank You for that comfort and assurance. Forgive us, Lord, for those many times we waver in our faith. Strengthen us in those times; it is our desire to have complete confidence in You.

Help us to reflect the light of Jesus in this dark and dying world. Those who are without Christ will have to bear the eternal consequence of their sins by themselves. May our very lives and our speech, always attract others to You. For Your glory and for their good.

In Jesus’ name we pray

Amen