

## Tikkun Olam

***‘Abraham believed the Lord,  
and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.’***

There may be no other sentence in the Old Testament that has been more significant to followers of the New. And more misleading.

God told Abraham that he and his wife, Sarah, would have millions of descendants- as many as the stars in the sky.

Abraham believed God and that was enough for God to credit Abraham as ‘righteous.’

Ever since Martin Luther, the Founding Father of Protestantism, Father Abraham has served as Exhibit A for what we think it means for us to have faith:

Abraham did not lift a finger to be saved.  
Abraham did nothing to earn or deserve it.  
Abraham simply believed in God.  
Abraham was saved by faith alone.

At least that’s what we think Paul means in Romans 4.  
But here’s the problem:

When we reduce Abraham to an example (for us) of someone who has faith in God and is rewarded accordingly- we lose the biblical plot of what God is doing IN and THROUGH Abraham.

And when we lose that plot, the seam of Paul’s entire argument in the Book of Romans unravels. Because the argument Paul is weaving from Romans 1 to Romans 16 is that what we discover in Jesus Christ is God making good on a promise first made to Abraham.

Because when you go back to the Book of Genesis, you notice:

It doesn’t say Abraham believed IN God.  
It says Abraham *believed God*.  
It doesn’t Abraham accepted God as his personal savior.  
It says Abraham *believed God*.

That is, Abraham accepted something God said.

Abraham believed a single thing God said.  
A very specific thing God said.  
Abraham believed the promise:  
the promise that his children would be like the stars in the sky.

But this promise, it isn't about God providing Abraham with progeny.

The promise is that THROUGH Abraham God would create a new and distinct People in the world.

The promise is that the way God would pick the world back up from its Fall, the way God would heal the world's sin, the way God would bring forth a New Creation would be by creating a New People.

The promise is that through the People of Abraham God would undo the problem of Adam.

The promise God makes to Abraham reveals God's commitment to the whole world, to this sinful and suffering world.

That's the unconditional commitment God promises and that's what Abraham believes.

And God, scripture says, reckons that to Abraham as 'righteousness.'

Abraham being 'reckoned righteousness' means Abraham was credited, acknowledged, signed up as a participant in God's New Creation work.

Abraham didn't believe **everything** he could possibly believe about God; in fact, plenty remained that Abraham still struggled to believe.

But despite his doubts, despite his questions, despite those parts of God's Word he scratched his head at and crossed his fingers through-

what Abraham always believed, what Abraham always had faith in, what it always meant for Abraham to be a person of faith, *the person of faith*, was his faith in this single promise:

The promise that God so loved the world, God would not give up on what he had made.

So whatever else it means for us to be People of faith, it means we have faith- it means we embody faith- in that single commitment of God to repair and redeem this world.

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One of the primary ways we embody our faith in that promise of God is through our hands-on work in Guatemala.

On Friday a team of about 30 of us from Aldersgate returned from Chuicutama, a village in the Highlands of Guatemala.

For the past 10 years Aldersgate has been serving in the Highlands and for 5 years now, we've been working alongside the indigenous Mayans in Chuicutama, partnering with them to repair their corner of God's creation.

Because this is one of the ways we live out the promise Paul points to in Romans 4, it seemed appropriate to walk you through the work we did this past week- the work that a good many of you made possible through your generosity and prayer.

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It may seem an odd transition but I think the best way to frame our work in Guatemala is to close by telling you about Emile Fackenheim, a holocaust survivor who went on to become the most important Jewish theologian of the 20th century.

He wrote a book of post-holocaust philosophy called ***To Mend the World***.

Fackenheim got the title for his book, *To Mend the World*, from the Jewish theological concept known as *tikkun olam* (תיקון עולם or תיקון עולם).

In Hebrew, *tikkun olam* means literally "repairing the world."

*Tikkun olam* expresses the Jewish idea that even though this world is broken, it is not beyond repair.

*Tikkun olam* holds on to the biblical belief that ever since Abraham it's been God's intention to work through the People of Abraham in order to repair his creation.

In *To Mend the World*, Fackenheim issues what he calls the 614th Commandment.

The rabbis always believed the Hebrew Scriptures- the Old Testament- contained 613 Commandments.

But because of the enormity of the Holocaust, Fackenheim says that those who worship the God of Israel should add one more commandment to the list, a 614th Commandment.

About the 614th Commandment Fackenheim writes:

***“We are forbidden to despair of the world as the place which is to become the kingdom of God, lest we help make it a meaningless place in which God is dead or irrelevant and everything is permitted.”***

In other words, Fackenheim says to his Jewish community that even in the face of suffering, they are not permitted to give up on the world.

They must still believe that a broken world can be repaired, that this world will become the kingdom of God, that Earth will be as Heaven.

To despair of this belief, Fackenheim asserts, is no different than colluding with the evil and suffering of the world.

*Tikkun olam* is a Jewish concept echoed by St. Paul in the New Testament when Paul says that God is restoring all things through Jesus Christ.

Too often Christians get hung up on the fact that Jews do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah; that is, they do not recognize Jesus as the One through whom God is repairing the world.

But just as critical, Christians too often fail to recognize that God's ancient intention is to repair the world at all. To heal the Sin of Adam through the People of Abraham.

Too often Christians have mistakenly thought that God is going to give up on this world, that God's already given up on his 'good' creation and will settle for a few saved souls in 'heaven' instead.

But the first Gospel preached by Jesus' disciples was no different than *tikkun olam*. The first Gospel wasn't the evacuation of souls from this world but the arrival of a new world.

The Kingdom of God.

The first Gospel was the good news that the resurrection of Jesus Christ revealed that God was making good on his promise to repair the whole world through the People of Abraham.

Through us.

Salvation is about restoration, not evacuation.

So Christians aren't people who wait to escape this broken world for the great by and by.

We're people who participate in God's promise to redeem his creation.

We're people who by our prayers and our actions obey the 614th Commandment.

We are a people who do not despair of this world and, in our own small ways- through our prayers, through our charity, through our hands- we join God in repairing it.