

How can I know God?

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[0:00] Now, can you turn with me in your Bible to Genesis chapter 15 on the church Bible?! That's on page 15. As we look at some scenes from the life of Abraham.

The question that we're asking ourselves today is, how can you and I know God? So Genesis 15 and at verse 1.

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. Do not be afraid, Abraham. I am your shield, your very great reward, or your reward will be very great.

But Abraham said, Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? And Abraham said, You have given me no children, so a servant in my household will be my heir.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir. He took him outside and said, Look up at the sky and count the stars, if indeed you can count them.

[1:07] Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be. Abraham believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness. He also said to him, I am a Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.

But Abraham said, Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it? So the Lord said to him, Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon. Abraham brought all these to him, cut them in two, arranged the halves opposite each other.

The birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abraham drove them away. As the sun was setting, Abraham fell into a deep sleep and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.

Then the Lord said to him, Know for certain that for four hundred years, your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions.

You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation, your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.

[2:21] When the sun had set, darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abraham and said, To your descendants I give this land, from the wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites.

Amen. So for the last two weeks, we've been asking some big questions together, and we've been using the life of Abraham for some answers.

So two weeks ago, we asked the question, what's gone wrong with the world? And as we went to the Tower of Babel, we saw the problem of human pride, of a seeking of glory that at the same time meant walking away from and rejecting a relationship with the God who made us.

And then last week, we were asking the question, who is God? And we saw that he is the personal God, and he is a God who makes promises, and he is a God who offers grace, and who offers us a way back to life with him.

And also, we saw that God wants us to know him. And so this week kind of follows on as we ask the question, well, how is it that I can know God? And this matters, because one of the things that the Bible wants us to understand is that you and I were made for God.

[3:48] I imagine a good number of us have been to Edinburgh Zoo or some other zoo in our time. And it's great fun to go to a zoo, and you see beautiful animals, and you see magnificent animals.

But I wonder if you've ever had the experience as you've, you know, looked at the lion in the cage or the monkeys in their enclosure of thinking, it's a little bit sad at the same time, isn't it? Because we know that these animals were made for something more.

Every Christian, we share a story. We have come to discover personally that God is good. We have come to know the joy of friendship with God through Jesus.

We've come to understand, in the end, what we were truly made for. And that's what we want everyone else to know and to experience. That's why we worship.

That's why we share the good news of Jesus. So that other people might experience God's love and grace for themselves. And so our goal today is to show from Genesis 15, how is it we can know God?

[4:59] And what we see really are two sides of the same coin. So we're going to see, first of all, the human side. And there's that emphasis on faith that trusts God and trusts God's promises.

But then we also see God's side. We see the faithfulness of God, his commitment to make promises and to keep those promises. And so we're going to come across an important word today. I guess we don't use it that much. It's the word covenant. Maybe in a wedding ceremony, we might hear it. Marriages, we might think about it. And it's a reminder that it's a particular kind of relationship.

Because I guess we've had experience of different kinds of relationships. If we talk about a consumer relationship, we probably have a sense of what that looks like.

You know, we're asking the question, what can I get out of this relationship? I will stay in this relationship for as long as I feel it benefits me. And if it doesn't work anymore, then I'll move along.

[6:02] That's a consumer relationship. But then there's a covenantal relationship. And whenever you hear the oaths of a marriage ceremony, you owe for better, for worse, for sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer.

It's a reminder that it's a greater level of commitment. Consumer relationships don't provide the same security that a covenant does.

It's covenant that shows here is a genuine commitment, come what may. And what we discover is that covenant commitments become the basis for life actually flourishing really well.

And the good news of the Bible is that God's love, it's not based on a consumer agreement. It is entirely covenantal. And we can know God because of his covenantal love and through faith in Jesus.

So we're going to think of two sides of the same coin. First of all, the reality that faith trusts God's promise. So that takes us to Genesis 15 verses 1 to 6.

[7:07] So have a look at the text with me. And you'll notice right at the beginning it says after this. So we're jumping into the story. So we need to ask very briefly, well, what's just happened? And if you've got time, you can read chapter 14.

And you will discover that Abraham's nephew Lot has been taken as a prisoner of war. And Abraham has really bravely gone with some of the men of his household. And he's rescued his nephew Lot.

He's joined in a battle against an alliance of kings. And then after the successful battle, it's this really interesting moment where he refuses to take a reward from a king he regards as wicked. And then we get to after this. And so what comes next deliberately follows on. So after this, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. Do not be afraid, Abraham.

I am your shield. Your reward will be very great. And God's making a striking point here. So remember, Abraham's just been in battle. But now God comes to him and says, you weren't afraid in that battle.

[8:11] There is something more to be feared than war. And there's something to be feared is to be in the presence of the holy God.

And then God says to him, Abraham, know this. I am your shield. And your reward from me will be very great.

God is Abraham's king. God is Abraham's protector. God will give Abraham his reward. God is God's kingdom. And so, so far, so good.

Because here we have another example of the personal God. And he's coming near. And he's showing his commitment. He's making a promise. God is on Abraham's side. But then what comes next?

Look at verse 2 and verse 3. We find complaint. Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless?

[9:07] Back in Genesis 12, God promised to give him a child. And from that child would come a nation. Here's a huge challenge that we have within the Christian faith.

This gap that can exist between God's promises and our reality. So three times Abraham has been promised a child. But as of yet, still no child.

And in that gap, it can be so tempting to question, is God good? Is he for me? Is he going to keep his promises? And so one of the things that we need to do as Christians is we need to learn to mind the gap.

So Abraham says to God, well, what use is reward if I don't have a promised son? If I have to leave it all to a servant rather than to an heir? Where's the value in that?

Abraham is living by faith. But he's discovering it's really hard at times to wait for God's promise. Something else for us to notice for our own lives.

[10:13] Notice that Abraham doesn't give in to bitterness. He doesn't let that eat him up from the inside. Rather, he does the right thing. What's the right thing to do? He prays.

He laments. He takes his concern and his complaint to God. It's a reminder to us to be honest when we pray.

Because after all, God knows. He knows the situation and he knows us. And what he's doing is he is claiming God's promise. And he's, as it were, holding God to his promise.

Well, you said. So where is he? Listen to the prayer of this old man of faith. He begins, sovereign Lord. He knows the covenant Lord is king and he is in control.

And again, don't we find that sometimes as Christians, that can be challenging. So life gets hard and things are distressing. And sometimes it makes it even harder when we know, well, God's in control of everything.

[11:17] And so he has permitted this. And I don't know why, but sometimes that makes things hard. Abraham says directly to God, verse 3, you have given me no children.

So he knows life comes from God and he believes God is able to do the impossible. But here he is living in the gap between God's promise and his reality and it's tough.

And it reminds us that sometimes the Christian life is hard. And sometimes discouragement is real. And we pray and we don't see answers.

And what should we do? We don't give in to bitterness. Rather, we are to follow Abraham. We take it to the Lord. We take our list of worries and we turn it into a list of prayers.

We lament. We don't turn away from or against God. We turn to God. And so the Lord listens to his prayer. Good news that God listens to prayer.

[12:22] And his word comes. So now look at verses 4 to 6. So after we've seen the context and we've seen the complaint, then there's this counting that goes on.

And first of all, look at what Abraham is invited to count in verse 4 and 5. So Yale University in the States, they have produced a bright star catalog. So apparently with the naked eye, there are 9,110 stars that are easily visible.

Listen to verse 4 and 5. This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir. He took him outside and said, look up at the sky and count the stars.

Indeed, you can count them. Then he said to him, so shall your offspring be. So God speaks to Abraham in the middle of the night. He wakes him out and he calls him out of his tent to look up. Remember, he's living in kind of deserty conditions, so there's probably not much cloud. So it's a beautiful, bright, starlit night. And he gives him the sign of the stars to make his promise visible.

[13:28] And the point is not, okay, let's see what the exact number of stars is. Those are the number of children that Abraham's going to have. It's the idea that he is going to have lots and lots and lots.

There's going to be a big family. And that family is not going to come through a servant, but through a flesh and blood heir. And so we're learning something really important with Abraham, that the God who made the stars and the God who numbers and names them, he can raise up a son for Abraham beyond all human hope.

And that principle is one we will see again on Easter Sunday when his own son is risen from the dead. So that was Abraham counting the stars.

And then wonderfully, we find God counting in verse six. Abraham believed the Lord and the Lord credited it or counted it to him as righteousness.

So we get this wonderful example of a repeating pattern of Abraham's life. He doesn't do this perfectly, but he does it often. God said it. I believe it.

[14 : 39] End of story. Here comes God's staggering promise made to an old man in the wilderness, married to a lady who can't have children.

And Abraham again responds with faith. And it's that response. It's as he believes God's word of promise. That's why God counts it as righteousness.

He is credited with that status of being right before God because Abraham by faith believes God's word of promise. Abraham didn't do anything.

He didn't do some great moral deed. He didn't perform some great moral action. Abraham looks with trust. And clings with trust to God and his promise.

And so we need to get this right. It's the message of the catechism as well. Christianity is not a religion that says you need to perform to earn God's favor. No, Christianity says that we are saved by Christ alone.

[15 : 47] He does everything for us. By God's grace alone, we don't merit it. And that comes to us through faith alone. And that faith, remember, is a gift from God.

And so faith is really a matter of running into the arms of Christ Jesus and trusting that when God says he will save and keep us, we can take him at his word.

To give us some pictures, faith is the small child on the edge of the swimming pool diving, trusting that their parent will catch them when they hit the water.

Faith is Mary Jane Parker. When the building is about to collapse, reaching up and taking Spider-Man's hand, trusting that he will catch her and hold her.

Or to look at some examples from Jesus' life. Faith is like blind Bartimaeus. When he hears Jesus is coming by, screaming his lungs out, Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.

[16 : 57] It's the father desperately pleading for his son. I do believe, but help my unbelief. Faith looks like the thief on the cross, turning to look at Jesus, suffering and dying in agony.

And saying to him, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. If you and I want to know God today, Abraham becomes for us a model of faith.

Because what we see in Abraham is what we need to do. We need to respond with trust to God's word of promise to us. We need to trust in Jesus, God's good news message, God's promise to us. In the Bible, and we've seen this, we discover there is this universal problem of sin and guilt. That we have rebelled, we have wandered away from God, and we've broken that relationship we were made for, and we cannot fix it.

So we are separated with no way home, except that God sends his son Jesus. And Jesus comes by the grace of God to justify us, to give us a new status before God, to wash away our sin, and to bring us back home.

[18 : 18] And on the cross, this wonderful exchange happens. So as Jesus takes our place on the cross, and he takes our sin upon himself, and he takes on himself the death that we deserve, our sin is counted to Jesus' account.

And he is punished, and he feels that sense of being separated from his father. And then when we believe in Jesus, his perfect righteousness, well, that's counted to our account.

And that's how the father, though he is holy and perfect, he can look on us, and love us, and welcome us. Not because of anything that we have done, but all because of his goodness and grace in giving us Jesus.

And faith trusts God's promise in Jesus. So that's one side of the coin, but we also need to think about the faithfulness of God to his promise, and that's there from verse 7 to verse 21.

Verse 7 reminds us of a promise earlier made, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it. Now, as people, we make promises all the time.

[19 : 38] We make promises when we are children. We'll be BFFs forever. We make promises to the people we love, I will always love you. We sign contracts. We make oaths.

But sadly, you and I know this, because of our fallen condition, often we don't keep those promises. We change our mind.

We forget about them. Or we simply find ourselves unable to carry out what we hoped we could perform. And so we might think, well, if God is like that, if God is in any way like us, then I'm not sure he's a God I can trust.

And especially perhaps when life gets hard, can I trust his word that he won't break it? Will he really love me to death and beyond?

And I think that's where Genesis 15 becomes so helpful and so powerful for us because Abraham discovers in a really visual and dramatic way that God is utterly committed, utterly faithful.

[20 : 51] He establishes a covenant that he will not break. And do you know, it's part of God knowing us so well. He knows that in our own human weakness, we need visuals.

And so he gives visuals to the church. Next Sunday, we'll share the Lord's Supper together. And bread will be broken. And wine will be drunk as a reminder of God's, Jesus' body broken and his blood shed.

We have it at baptism. God chooses to make the gospel, the good news visible to us to strengthen our faith in his faithfulness. So we're going to think really briefly about the promise that God makes to Abraham and the sign that he gives.

So we saw in verse seven, there's the promise that he would receive what becomes known as the promised land, the land of Canaan. And then later in verse 13, if you turn over the page to verse 13, now God speaks to Abraham in a vision.

So it's nighttime and he comes to him again. And in this vision, we discover this promise that he receives from God. Well, it's going to be slow because notice that it's going to take 400 years of Abraham's descendants being strangers and slaves before the promise is going to be fulfilled.

[22 : 16] So it's slow, but it's also certain, know for certain that God will act in his good timing to ensure that his promise is kept.

Verse 16, we're reminded something of the patience of God. The end there, in the fourth generation, your descendants will come back here for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.

God's promise was somehow connected with this idea of a judgment on the people in the land, but God was showing patience and giving them the chance to repent. Peter picks that up in the New Testament.

God's not slow in keeping his promise. Some people think that, but actually he's patient so that you and I would have a chance to repent and turn back to trust in Jesus. So that's the promise to Abraham.

I will give you descendants and your descendants will in the fullness of time receive a land. But then we come to the sign and this is the really interesting bit. And this takes us to the idea of covenant.

[23 : 20] So just to go back to where we think of covenant, perhaps most naturally, think about a marriage as a covenant. At that marriage ceremony, there is always the covenant sign. Remember when the rings are exchanged, those rings are a sign of covenant commitment.

Well, God has a different kind of sign of covenant commitment here. I'm not sure it would take off in our modern wedding ceremonies, but it says something really powerful.

So we need to turn to verse nine and 10 and picture for just a moment, old Abraham. He's over 75 years old, somewhere between 75 and 86. So he's an older gentleman and he's been sent on a mission to gather these animals.

So he's got to gather the heifer, the goat, the ram, and a couple of birds. And then what he has to do with the animals, but not the birds, is he has to kill them and he has to slice them in half.

It's not a job for the faint hearted. And then what he has to do is he has to create some kind of aisle. So there's one half over here and one half over here. And you might be thinking, what in the world is going on?

[24 : 34] At that time, cultures vary, at the time of Abraham, there was a particular kind of covenant ceremony that spoke of both commitment and curse taking.

So picture a couple of kings. They've come to a decision that they're going to make a peace treaty. There's probably a greater king and a lesser king. As they make this agreement and they write down, here's their commitments to one another to kind of ratify this agreement, to sign at the bottom of the page.

They don't just get the bit of paper out and have like a nice ceremony of writing with photographers. What they do is they create this aisle with the dead animals and each of them walks through that together.

And they're saying to one another and to everybody else that's watching, we will do what we have promised to do. And if we don't, may we be torn apart like these animals.

So a really graphic way to say, I am absolutely committed to this promise. And if not, I fall under the curse. Okay? So we've got the picture. And Abraham's created the picture.

[25:46] And now what we need to see is the really astonishing, wonderful thing about this picture in verse 17, which tells us so much about God's relationship with us. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abraham. Okay? Who walks through the aisle of the cut-up animals?

Well, it's not Abraham because he's fast asleep. But instead, what Abraham gets in the vision is a picture of God himself. Because fire and smoke is a picture of God's glory and God's presence.

And so what we have is God walking through alone. This is a one-sided covenant. This is God committing to keep his promise.

This is God saying to Abraham and saying to us, I would rather be torn apart than for my relationship with humanity to be broken. Now think about how committed God is when he performs this act in the vision.

[27:02] And think about what it means for you and I. If we are to know God, God must take the initiative. God must make promises.

And God must act on those promises. And God must keep those promises. And in Jesus, he does. So as the storyline of the Bible continues, and this idea of God's covenant commitment to people continues, we get an even greater sign that shows us just how committed God is to us and how willing he is to undergo the curse for us.

And it's there with Jesus. Because here is Jesus, the living God, who takes on human nature so that in the end he will taste death in the place of covenant breakers as he suffers and dies on the cross.

And what the Bible tells us about the cross is that there on the cross, Jesus goes under the curse of the covenant as if he'd broken the law. He hadn't, we had, but he takes our place.

Jesus takes the curse of God in full. Nothing left for us. If by faith we trust in Jesus, then blessing flows to us because Jesus took the curse instead.

[28:24] And because Jesus was willing to be forsaken by his Father, that's how we can enjoy relationship with God. Jesus took our place and took our punishment so that God might be our God and we might be his people, that God might be our Father and we could know him as his children.

The story of Abraham reminds us that the way to enjoy the life with God that we were made for rests in God's covenant commitment to us in the Lord Jesus.

So how can you and I know God today? We trust his promise to us in the Lord Jesus. I imagine we will have seen images at various times.

Maybe you've seen it in real life. Those moments where, let's say, a big whale beaches, you know, they kind of get washed in for some reason or get in distress and they end up ashore.

And it usually makes the news. And if you watch the news, you see these rescuers, you know, small people compared to this massive whale and they've got their tiny buckets and they're throwing the water on.

[29:36] They're doing everything they can to save this whale and there's something so sad and pitiful about it because we know and they know that the whale is made to swim in the depths of the ocean.

Do you know, God's message to us in the Bible is that you and I, as people made by God in his image, we were made to swim in the depths of God's love and God's grace.

And whenever we try to find life in something else, it always falls short of what we were made for.

So when we find ourselves looking for a love that lasts, we're invited to come to Jesus, Jesus who died for us and rose again for us who says, I am like the husband who is committed to you, committed to death and beyond, committed to always be with you and for you.

That's what Jesus says to his church, to his people. When we're searching for the security that we need, we need to turn to Jesus because while other people may let us down, while we let others down, God cannot break his promise.

God cannot be untrue to himself. When we trust in Jesus, he will be our God, we will be his and he will never leave us or forsake us. And so we discover in the story of the Bible that Jesus and Jesus alone gives us the relationship that we were made for.

[31 : 04] And we don't need to search for it and we don't need to fight to make ourselves worthy of it. Rather, we turn to him by faith to receive that relationship as a gift.

And when we do, well, you and I then enter the joy of God's covenant love. Let's pray together. Our God and our Father, we thank you for this story that speaks to us of your covenant love and reminds us of our call to exercise faith.

And we thank you for the way this imagery speaks to us ultimately of Jesus' body being torn so that our relationship with you could be healed.

It speaks to us of your commitment to save a people for yourself, to give us the privilege of life with you. Pray that as Christians, we'd never take that for granted, but rather we would always enjoy our life with our God.

And we pray for those who aren't yet Christians that you would enable them to see and to receive this gift of life with you through trusting in Jesus.

[32 : 15] And we pray in his name. Amen.