

Abraham 4

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[0 : 00] Turn with me this evening then to the chapter that I read previously to Genesis chapter 15. And we're going to read once again from verse 16, or rather verse 17 I should have said.

Genesis 15 and verse 17, and it came to pass that when the sun went down and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace and a burning lamp passed between those pieces.

Then verse 18, in that same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram. We'll leave it there, in the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram.

As you know we've been looking at what I hope is to you the fascinating life of this tremendous man of God who's not only an example, but he is the father of all those who live by faith.

Because faith is written all over Abraham. And that's why references made time and time again to him, even in the New Testament, as a man who trusted God and who lived according to the promises of God.

[1 : 26] And as a figure of a Christian, the New Testament Christian. Because that's how we live if we're Christians tonight. We live by faith and not by sight. And Abraham is a tremendous example.

We're able to go back time and time again and to learn from the way that Abraham lived. And to take our lessons from his life.

A tremendous example. Now I must confess that chapter 15 is not going to be as easy as chapter 14. Or any of the chapters that we've been looking at so far.

The temptation for a preacher when he comes across a difficult passage is to just ignore it and move on to the next passage. In the hope that he can find an easier. But I don't believe that that's a right thing.

I don't believe there is ever right to ignore difficult passages in the Bible. The whole of the Bible is God's word to us. God has something to say in all of the Bible.

[2 : 26] And I have no right whatsoever as a minister to say, well this is too difficult. Or it's too complicated. It's too awkward for me to talk about. And besides, besides, I have to believe that tonight as every other time we gather here today.

That the Lord speaks even through the difficulties in the Bible. And it's my job to preach the whole of the Bible. Even although it's difficult. So I must ask you this evening to perhaps pay special attention to this passage.

Perhaps give it that concentration. Because we need to give it that fullness of concentration in order to try and grasp what is going on here. Now remember in chapter 14, Abraham has defeated the four kings and their armies who had come from the east into the Palestine area.

And had kidnapped Lot and his possessions. And remember how word had come to Abraham and he had pursued them. And he was taken back. And he had defeated those four kings.

And he came back to where he lived. Now you would think that Abraham would return confidently after such a decisive defeat. After such a decisive victory against what must have been a much larger army.

[3 : 42] And much more trained army than Abraham's servants were. There was only 318 of them. And this must have been a vast experienced army from the east led by these four kings.

You would expect that after a victory of that kind of nature. Abraham would come back with his chest in the air. And with his head swelling. And with his pride having been fulfilled. Not so.

Not so. No, that's not the kind of person that Abraham was at all. Because Abraham knew that he was where he was. Because God had taken him. And he knew also that he had obtained the victory over those four kings.

Because God had given him the strength to do. There was no other way. This was nothing short of a miracle that had taken place. In which God had given him the power and the strength. And the

skill to have the victory over those four much more experienced and much more skilled kings than he did.

But that doesn't mean. Because a person lives by faith doesn't mean that that person is immune to all fear. Because for Abraham it wouldn't have taken much for those four kings or for their replacements.

[4 : 50] To have come all the way back and to have gathered forces. To have regrouped and to seek revenge on Abraham for what he had done. And in a human sense there would never be another day when he would be able to sleep soundly at night.

Because he never knew he had made enemies for himself. Serious enemies for himself. And yet for Abraham it was one day at a time.

And the same God who had brought him thus far had promised to give him the land that he stood on. And the land that he lived on. So that's what it means to live by faith.

And so God once again appeared to Abraham and made this promise that we saw before at the very beginning of Abraham's...

Of what the Bible has to say about him in chapter 12. But it was years now since God had led him into the land of Canaan.

[5 : 51] And it was now years since God had promised him. That even in his old age, and he was 75 years old when he had come into Canaan. And it was now years afterwards. And still God had not fulfilled the promise that he would have a son.

And his wife was already beyond childbearing age. And it was already going to be a miracle if she ever was to have a child. It would already be a miracle. And yet all he had, the only thing he had, was the promise, the word of God, that you will have a son.

There was no sign of it. There's not even the slightest indication that that promise would ever be fulfilled. And yet God had made that promise. And when he makes that promise yet again in chapter 15.

And when he further explains the promise by taking him outside and said, Look towards the heavens and tell, if you're able to count the stars, so will your seed be.

And Abraham simply trusted in the word and the promise of God. And we have a very, very precious verse in verse 6 of this chapter.

[7 : 01] One which the apostle Paul refers to in the New Testament as an example of what it means to believe in the Lord, in the word of God. He believed in the Lord and God counted it to him for righteousness.

That's the only way that we can be saved tonight. Is if God credits righteousness into our account. If God pays his righteousness into our account.

And that's what it means in verse 6 when Abraham believed and he counted it to him for righteousness. Abraham was a thoroughly saved and a converted man.

But then, even so, Abraham asked the question, Even so, how can I know that I shall inherit it? I don't believe that that was a failure on Abraham's part.

I think that was his own just humanness and asking, Is there any way, is there any way, Lord, that you can show me, that you can demonstrate to me, that this promise will be fulfilled?

[8 : 05] And so, in answer to that question, God gave him instructions, which seemed to us to be utterly bizarre. Now we're coming on to the strange part of the chapter.

Perhaps difficult for us to understand until we try and get to the heart of what's happening here. As an answer to the question that Abraham asked, God told Abraham to go and collect a collection of animals, to gather a collection of animals.

He was to get a heifer, three years old. He was to get a female goat, three years old. And he was to get a ram that was three years old.

He was also to get a dove and a young pigeon. Abraham takes these animals, and he seems to know exactly what to do with them.

He doesn't need to wait for any instructions of the Lord. He knows, he seems to know exactly what the Lord is saying to him on this occasion. He knows exactly what to do with them. He takes each of these animals, except the birds, he kills them, and he cuts each one of them in half.

[9 : 19] Now, just in case you think that this is a sacrifice, let me tell you from the outset, this is not a sacrifice. It might look from certain perspectives as if it might be a sacrifice.

This is not a sacrifice. There were other places in which Abraham made a sacrifice to the Lord. This is not one of those places. This is something unique. This is a one-off.

This is something that's never happened before, and it's never going to happen again. This is the most solemn moment in Abraham's life and in his relationship with the Lord.

This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience where Abraham has asked the Lord, how can I know that your promises are going to come true? And God says to him, I'm going to show you.

I'm going to demonstrate to you in such a way that you will never, ever, ever, there will never be a shadow of doubt ever again. I'm going to do something in your presence and in your sight that's going to leave you in absolutely no doubt.

[10:22] I am going to demonstrate to you that the promises I have made to you will come true. And this is the way I'm going to do it. So Abraham, he takes these animals and he cuts them in half.

He cuts each one in half. And he lays, now you have to imagine what's happening here because the chapter tells us, but we have to try and close our eyes and imagine the picture of what's happening. He lays half the heifer on one side and the other half on the other side. He then lays half the goat on one side and he lays half the goat on the other side.

And then he lays half the ram on one side and he lays half the ram on the other side. Now you know what's happening here. There's two rows of half animals, each half opposite the other.

And the birds he placed, he didn't cut the birds in half, he just put them on the ground. So there's two rows, there's a row, there's two rows of half animals and there's a passage going through the half animals.

[11:34] That was the whole idea. Then God once more made the promise to him. He once more made the promise to him.

And he said, he said, know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs and shall serve them and they shall afflict them for 400 years and also that nation who they shall serve will I judge.

He makes the promise once again. Then the most solemn moment in this whole experience of Abraham, we read about it in verse 12. When the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abraham and lo, a horror of great darkness fell upon him.

It's really hard to describe what this must have been like for Abraham. Abraham was only a human being like ourselves. He was subject to weakness and fear and trembling just the same way as you and I are subject to weakness.

And we read here that he felt this utter dread, this sense of utter horror, a horror of great darkness fell upon him.

[12:48] Why was that? Why was it that he felt that way? Well, I'll tell you why. Because this is one of the rare moments in the Bible when a man stands literally face to face with God.

It's one of those moments in the Bible when a man is brought, when an ordinary human being like you and I is brought into the near presence. So near that they can feel the very presence of God. I believe that if any one of us were brought into that same, that presence of God, we would feel it. And we would feel it as a sense of fear. Why? Why would we sense this horror?

Because God is utterly and completely holy and sinless. And we are sinners. And the reason that we, that Abram felt this was because here you are taking, taking almost two opposites and you're bringing them together.

Here God was literally taking himself down to where Abram was. and as it were, standing beneath. There are other places in the Bible where you find the same thing happened.

[13:59] For example, when Isaiah, in Isaiah chapter 6, I'm sure most of us have read that chapter, in which Isaiah saw the Lord, I saw the Lord, high and lifted up and his train filled the temple.

What was the effect of seeing the Lord, this vision that he had? What effect did that have on Isaiah? You know what effect it had? It brought the sense of sin to the surface. And whilst he might have beforehand tried to hide his sin and try and run away from his sin or try and pretend that it didn't exist, just like we all do, that in the presence of God there is no hiding.

And all of a sudden his sin just came up to the surface and he said, woe is me for I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips.

When Jacob, there's another example, Jacob, when he lay down and when he saw the vision of God in which a ladder reached from earth to heaven and he saw the angels ascending and

descending the ladder and he saw the glory of God, you know what he said?

He said, this is a dreadful place. How dreadful is this place? He was filled with sheer horror at the prospect of having been in the near presence of the Lord.

[15:16] It was the same with Moses at the burning bush. Moses was afraid, we're told, when he saw and when he realized what was happening as he spoke to God who spoke to him in the burning bush.

It's the same with the apostle John. It doesn't change in the New Testament, by the way. God is the same in the New Testament as he is in the Old Testament. When the glorious Lord Jesus appeared to John on the Isle of Patmos in Revelation chapter 1, what effect did it have on him?

He fell to the ground as one dead. That's the effect it had on him. So it's no wonder then that we read the words that when God brought himself literally down to where Abraham was, that Abraham had a horror of great darkness falling upon him.

And you know what? even despite the sense of fear that Abraham has. Let me tell you something. There's no other place in this world that Abraham would prefer to be.

Whatever his fear, whatever his horror, that's where he wants to be in the presence of God.

Because it was the same with Isaiah.

[16:30] Even although Isaiah saw his own sinfulness and his own guilt before the Lord, yet when the Lord said, who shall go for us? Who shall I send? Isaiah said, here I am.

Send me. You see, a person who is redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ has a sense of the fear of God. But there's also a love for God that overcomes that sense of fear.

And whilst Abraham feared God, he also deeply loved him. Because God first loved him. And he lived for God.

And he loved God with all his heart. And so God came down to where Abraham was. And he spoke to him. The first thing he did was he renewed the promise that he would have the land.

And that his seed would inherit the land. And that in his seed all nations would be blessed. And the Bible goes on to tell us that when God says that in his seed all nations will be blessed, that means the Lord Jesus Christ.

[17:38] Because Jesus was the seed of Abraham through whom the world would come to hear the gospel and the world or people from every nation and every tribe and every color and every culture would one day come and take their place in the kingdom of God.

You see God's plan is for the whole of the world. It's not just for Lewis or for Glasgow or for whatever there's wee churches here and there. God's plan is universal.

And one day we believe that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. That's the promise that the Bible gives.

God's promise is universal. So the first thing that God does is he speaks to Abraham but then he appears before him. Now watch what happens here because this is where this is the heart of the chapter.

And it came to pass in verse 17 that when the sun went down and it was dark behold now look at this a smoking furnace and a burning lamp passed between the pieces the pieces of animal.

[18:51] Remember I told you? There's two rows of half animals and there's a passageway in between. And as Abraham falls into that deep sleep he has a vision and in the vision he sees what is described here as a smoking furnace and a burning lamp and they pass.

Now I don't know if you can imagine it's not a furnace by the way as it's given here it's not the kind of furnace that we mean by a furnace which is something enormous. When it says a furnace here it's something relatively small if you can imagine I remember when I was a boy sometimes if you ever passed road works if they were doing some construction work in the town where we lived sometimes they had night watchmen and these men would stay there all night and to keep them warm they had this kind of metal bin it was like a round metal bin with holes in it I don't know if you've ever seen them it's like a round metal bin with holes in it and in the bin there was a fire like a coal fire and you could see this thing glowing and you could see the smoke coming from it and this was to keep them warm at night time and that was the kind of thing that Abraham saw that's what it means by a smoking furnace it's like a like a metal bin if you like with holes in it and there's smoke and fire coming from it and then he sees a burning lamp well of course that's not an electric lamp because they didn't have electricity in those days it's like a torch it's like a burning torch like an Olympic torch if you like

I suppose that's the nearest equivalent and he sees these because they represent the glory of God that's quite clear without any mistake they represent the presence of God so when he sees these things he knows that here is God coming in person as it were to come to do something special and you know what he does he passes down the passageway through that divides the animals the pieces of the animals so what's happening what is taking place the Lord made a covenant with Abraham that's what he's doing he's making a covenant with Abraham now let's just stop for a wee moment and remind ourselves what a covenant is because this is if you want to understand the Bible if you want to really get to grips with the Bible from start to finish you have to come face to face with the idea of covenant what was a covenant well some people think a covenant was an agreement but it wasn't an agreement an agreement between two parties an agreement between two parties is if one one part one says well if you do this

I'll do the other an agreement is where you say to your neighbor well if you take me to church tonight I'll take you to church the next Sunday that's an agreement but that's not what a covenant is because an agreement is if one thing takes place then the other thing takes place one thing is dependent on the other that's an agreement some people think a covenant is a contract well a contract it's not a contract either a contract is where you you're building a house and when you go to the builder and you say I will pay you a certain amount of thousands of pounds if you build this house and the contractor says if you pay me a certain amount of thousands of pounds I will build that's a contract that's not a covenant a covenant is where two people or two countries or two armies or two friends they come together and they say from now on we are committed to one another from this moment onwards we are in special precious unbreakable relationship with one another

I can't please don't underestimate what a covenant is there was no form of relationship so important in the Old Testament in the Old Testament times as a covenant very often you got it for example when one king and his army defeated another king and his army and the victor king would say to the to the defeated king I'm not going to destroy you I don't want to destroy you it does me no good to destroy all of you I have defeated you now let's enter into an agreement in which we will be friends we will be close friends but remember I'm the victor and you're the defeated one and so you have to serve me but the relationship will be one in which we are committed one to another now do you know what they would do do you know what they would do in order to create that agreement they would get an animal they would cut it in half and both of these kings would walk through the passageway that was created between the two halves of the animal and one king would say to the other from now on we are in special precious relationship to one another and if either of us breaks our relationship let us be as dead and as divided and as torn apart as this animal or that animal see Abraham knew exactly what was happening and he knew what God was doing and he knew that this was God making a covenant that's why when God told him to collect that those few animals he knew exactly what to do with them because that's how a covenant was created a covenant was always created by the death of an animal because by the shedding of the blood in order to reiterate to both parties how solemn and how unbreakable this relationship was going to be so when you had a covenant being created by two people if it was two kings for example they would both divide the animals up creating a passageway between them and they would both walk together down the passageway and they would make the solemn covenant promises to one another that if either of us breaks this covenant let us be death let there be death and let me be as that animal see a very very solemn very very solemn and a very very serious thing to do to make a covenant in those days you see we don't we don't have that in our culture we're going back 2000 years BC and you have to try and understand this as part of the Old Testament structure but I think

[25 : 59] I hope that we are understanding that this was a solemn pledge and a promise between two parties now I hope that you notice already that there is something strange about the way that God did this I've just told you that when a covenant was made say between two kings it was the two kings that walked down the passageway between the animals they both promised each other but here in this passage when God makes a covenant with Abraham only he passes between the pieces do you notice that normally you would expect him to call Abraham and say walk with me down this passage but he doesn't do that he passes between the pieces by himself think about that for a moment he passes between the pieces he came to pass that when the sun went down it was dark behold a smoking furnace and a burning lamp that passed between the two pieces now you say well I thought a covenant was between two parties

I thought it was it was had to be between two parties it was and I thought two parties had to agree and had to walk together they had but so what's happening here well I'll tell you what's happening something marvelous and here's where it connects with the gospel that God is passing alone between the two pieces because as well as passing himself he is also representing Abraham he passes on behalf of Abraham and in so doing he himself takes full responsibility and even if Abraham's seed and his family are going to in time break the covenant which they did on many occasions God is saying to Abraham whatever happens Abraham no matter what I for sure for sure will keep and fulfill my promise to give you the land to give you a son to give you a seed and that ultimately in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed in other words

God is taking upon himself the responsibility for the consequences of a broken covenant on a broken covenant God is standing in other words in Abraham's place he is Abraham's substitute and he is promising that even if there is death that God is God is promising that he will fulfill the promise he made to Abraham now where have you heard that before in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ in which Jesus as our substitute took our place and suffered the punishment that we deserved because we have all broken

God's law and broken his covenant but instead of God punishing us with the punishment that we deserve God in the person of his son Jesus Christ took our place and laid down his life so that by his death as a sacrifice for our sin we could be set free and liberated from the guilt of sin and so that we could enter into everlasting life by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ so even in an obscure passage like this I hope tonight that not only we have seen the solemnity and the importance of this passage for Abraham but I hope that you've seen in this passage how it speaks how it illustrates to us the kind of God that we worship a God who is merciful and kind a God who has called us and has invited us to come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest a God who has promised us forgiveness how do we know tonight that we can believe this Bible that promises that if we come to

Christ our sins will be completely forgiven how do we know because God has taken responsibility for it himself in the cross at Calvary and God has God in the person of his son Jesus has entered into death the death that we deserve in our place as our substitute instead of us so that we could be made the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ so the only question that remains this evening as always is our part in that great covenant that God has made have you come and have you trusted the Lord as your own personal saviour and have you come to see the enormity of what the death of Jesus

[31 : 58] Christ achieved it achieved the forgiveness of sins and the cleansing of sinners like ourselves and have you come to personal faith in him by putting your trust in him and in him alone and may this obscure passage tonight this obscure passage which is difficult for us to understand may it illustrate in some way the grace of God in the gospel in redeeming lost sinners to himself by taking their place and by suffering the death that we deserve in him on the cross there's just one more thing I want to say tonight as we close one more thing I would like to leave you with from this passage we read the passage and we saw how Abraham gathered the animals together and how he divided them in half but there's just one little comment that's made there and I often wonder what it is why is this comment there in verse 11 once

Abraham had had divided the pieces of the animals each piece over and against the other opposite each piece opposite the other we read in verse 11 that the fowls the birds of the air came down upon the carcasses and Abraham drove them away is this just an incidental little comment is this just a it so happened that these birds came out of nowhere or is it in the word of God for a reason is it there perhaps to illustrate something important something even as simple as here is God going to do something crucial it's going to do something that has never been done before in Abraham's lifetime and never will be done again here is God going to do something that deserves and requires Abraham's complete attention and here are these birds coming down almost as if to distract Abraham away and to destroy what God is trying to do it kind of reminds me of what the devil tries to do when we try to listen to the Lord tries to take our thoughts away tries to take the seed that God plants in our heart tries to snatch them away and make them disappear as quickly as possible so that he can destroy anything that God is doing and tonight what we need to do as we listen to the word of God even in this dark Old Testament form is to make sure that these birds keep away and nothing distracts us from giving a whole attention to what God has done for us in the person of Jesus Christ because if anything deserves my all my whole attention my undivided attention it's got

to be the gospel it's got to be the Lord Jesus Christ because in Jesus
I can have everlasting life life that no one can take away from me and make sure that nothing
snatches that promise or that word away from your heart tonight let's pray together our Lord and
God we ask that as we come to terms once again with the word and as we wrestle with it in our
minds and in our hearts we pray oh Lord that our understanding will increase that our appreciation
of it will increase and that you will enable us to grow in our knowledge of the scriptures and in our
knowledge of discovery of how great how great you are oh Lord God we pray that as we look at the
life of Abraham and as we as we think about his great example as a man of faith may we be men
and women who live by that same faith and trust in the promises of God in Jesus name
Amen