

God's Covenant with Abram

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Date: 17 February 2017

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[0 : 00] We turn this evening to that passage we read together from the book of Genesis, Genesis 15.

Jesus said, I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. It's a great promise from our God.

And yet sometimes it's a promise that is hard to believe. In some parts of the world, the gates of Hades appear to be doing quite a bit of prevailing.

Central Asia, much of the Middle East, the church is facing persecution and great opposition. Here in the West, Christianity appears to be on the wane as a rampant materialism and an aggressive atheism appear to grow in strength.

And sometimes our circumstances make it hard to believe the promises of God. Paul said, all things work together for the good of those who love him and who are called according to his purpose.

[1 : 25] That too is a great and a wonderful promise. Yet sometimes it's hard for us to see how that is going to be fulfilled.

Sometimes perhaps our own lives are in a mess. Sometimes we are confronted by many problems and many difficulties. And we scratch our heads and we say, well, how can that be God?

All things work together for good? Really? Sometimes God's promises to us say one thing.

Yet everything that is happening around us or perhaps in our own lives appear to make them look like a foolish fantasy. And here in Genesis 15, we discover Abraham in just that kind of place.

He had believed the great promises that God had made to him. We read of them in Genesis 12. Promise of the land.

[2 : 40] Promise of an heir and many descendants. Indeed, a great nation. Promise of blessing. That would spill out and touch indeed all the families of the earth.

Wonderful promises. Powerful promises. And Abraham had staked his whole life on those promises. Those promises meant everything to him.

And yet here in Genesis 15, there appears to be a huge gap between the promises that he had received and their fulfillment.

And so in these verses, we read that God comes to Abraham to meet with him and to speak to him.

And indeed to reveal himself to him. So that Abraham's faith and trust in those great promises might be strengthened.

[3 : 47] Sometimes that is what we need. Isn't it? Like Abraham, we travel the pathway of faith.

And there are occasions on our journey when we need to experience afresh the power and the presence of Almighty God.

So that we can confess with the psalmist. My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. So that we are enabled to keep on believing the promises of God.

And we're able to keep on going on the pathway of faith. It's part of what it means, isn't it? To come and to gather around the Lord's table.

But we meet together and we meet with God. We meet with Christ. He strengthens us. And he encourages us. And he blesses us.

[4 : 55] With his presence. And so in this passage and in the encounter that it describes. We discover Abraham receiving three things from God.

God drawing near to his servant to bless him and encourage him and strengthen him in the way of faith. So what does Abraham receive here?

Well, first of all, I want you to notice that Abraham receives God's assurance. He receives God's assurance. Verse 1, it says this.

After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. Fear not, Abraham. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great. And so this encounter that we read of here takes place directly after the events of the previous chapter.

After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abraham. And that links chapter 15, of course, with the events of chapter 14. And in that chapter, we don't have time to go into it, but there was an encounter that Abraham had with Kedol-Amer and also with the king of Sodom.

[6 : 11] And it's after these encounters that God comes to Abraham and says, Abraham, fear not. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great.

And so perhaps our first question is this. Well, why? Why does God come to Abraham at this point? Why does God engage with Abraham in this unusual way? And how does that link to the previous chapter?

Why does God tell Abraham not to be afraid? I mean, what was Abraham to be afraid about? And there, well, there's a couple of possibilities. In chapter 14, we read of this daring rescue that Abraham performed for his nephew Lot.

And perhaps Abraham was afraid of reprisals from Kedol-Amer, king of Elam. Maybe he was worried that the king and his allies would come after him and seek vengeance. And so God is reminding Abraham that he is his shield and his defender.

Or it may be because Abraham had renounced, as he had, the bounty that he was offered from the king of Sodom. He rejected the riches and the wealth that was on offer to him.

[7 : 24] And so God comes to him and reminds him that he is Abraham's great reward. He would supply all his needs. I am your shield, your very great reward.

Amazing statement that is. Not simply God offering Abraham protection and reward, but telling him that he himself is his shield and reward.

Isn't that amazing? And yet even as God does that and speaks to Abraham in this way, Abraham doesn't exactly respond with praise and thanksgiving, you'll notice.

He doesn't click his heels and punch the air and shout hallelujah. Instead, what you may discover is he pours out his heart to God. He unburdens himself. The real cause of his fears and anxieties is then revealed and exposed.

It turns out that Abraham is concerned about the promises of God. He wants them. They're precious to him. He wants to be sure of them.

[8 : 31] Oh Lord God, verse 2. What will you give me? For I continue childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus.

Behold, you have given me no offspring and a member of my household will be my heir. Abraham had been by this point some 10 years in Canaan.

And yet those great promises that God had given him appeared no nearer fulfillment. He was promised an heir and descendants beyond counting. He was told that they would become a great nation.

And yet these years have passed and he doesn't even have a son. Someone else will inherit. His faith in the promises that God has given him are being tested.

His faith is being challenged by uncertain circumstances. His trust in God's goodness and faithfulness is being put to test by the passage of time.

[9 : 37] So Abraham brings his questions and his concerns and his burden to the Lord. He casts all his anxieties at the Lord's feet.

That is in itself an important expression of biblical faith. Dale Ralph Davis, the commentator, writes this.

Unbelief spits on the promises. Only faith struggles over them. Unbelief dismisses the promises. Only faith debates them with God.

Unbelief. Now these kinds of feelings. Perplexity. Bewilderment at God's ways. Do not belong exclusively to Abram.

All of us, if we are men and women of faith, have to deal with reality, don't we? Of challenging circumstances. That apparently contradict our faith in God.

[10 : 41] We all sometimes ask the question. Why? Why is this happening? Why is God allowing this?

Why has this illness come into our family's life? Why has death taken that person that I love? Why have I lost my job? Why has this relationship broken or come to an end?

Lord, what is going on? Why? We all face times, seasons of doubt. When our faith is under pressure.

None of us are exempt from the kind of questions that troubled Abram's soul. None of us are immune from those spiritual viruses of fear and doubt that can attack us.

But like Abram, we need to... How important this is. We need to bring our questions and our doubts and our sorrows and our tears to God himself.

[11 : 51] How important that is. The Baptist hymn writer, Anne Steele, from the 18th century, she wrote a number of very, very fine hymns.

And one of them goes like this. Dear refuge of my weary soul, on thee when sorrows rise, on thee when waves of trouble roll, my fainting hope relies.

To thee I tell each rising grief, for thou alone canst heal. Thy word can bring a sweet relief for every pain I feel.

And so we see here in this chapter, we discover God meeting with Abram in all his frailty as a human being, in all his doubts, in all his perplexity.

And God comes to him to strengthen him and to strengthen his faith. Gives his doubts and his fears over to God. God, in turn, gives to Abram words and symbols and signs of his great faithfulness and love.

[13 : 13] So it says in verse 4, Behold, the word of the Lord came to him. This man shall not be your heir. Your very own son shall be your heir.

And he brought him outside and said, Look towards heaven and number the stars if you're able to number them. So shall your offspring be. So God speaks to Abram very directly and tells him, Look, your heir shall not come from one of your household.

It shall be your very own son. And then God gives to Abram this visual picture of the extent of the promise.

It's as if he doesn't just want Abram to hear it, he wants him to see it. He wants to impress upon Abram's mind and heart the sheer magnitude of what he is going to accomplish by his grace.

And so he takes him out to look at the night sky and to witness the multitude of stars arrayed across the heavens. He says, Abram, try and count them.

[14 : 27] So shall your offspring be. I will make good and my promise have no fear. And it was G.K. Chesterton who once famously said, Don't believe anything that can't be told in colored pictures.

And that is what God is doing here. He's giving Abram a colored picture of his promise to strengthen and assure his faith.

You can imagine that from perhaps from that day onward, every time Abram lifted up his eyes to the night sky, cast his eyes across the heavens, he would be reminded of the God who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.

It would be forever a night sky peppered with the promises of God. Sometimes that is the way that God works, isn't it?

He gives us signs and symbols and tokens of his assurance. It doesn't make his promises more sure, but it sometimes makes us more sure of his promises.

[15 : 47] because as God's people we are called to live by the promises of God. Great and precious promises.

Promises that are yes and amen in Jesus Christ. So here Abraham receives God's assurance. And friends, so do we.

Because God has drawn us a picture, hasn't he, of his love. not simply upon the night sky, but in a table spread with bread and with wine.

There we come with all our fears, all our struggles, and all our doubts, and all our questions. we take the bread and we break it and we eat it and we remember one whose body was broken on a cross for our sakes.

We take the cup and we take the wine and we drink it and we remember that blood that was shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

[17 : 01] it's in that, in a sense, in that bread and wine we see the love of God spread out before us. As we come in faith, we receive his assurance that absolutely nothing in this world or beyond this world can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

in a sense the communion table is our night sky studded with the very promises of God.

Promises of forgiveness. Promises of righteousness. Promises of eternal life. The God who comes to us to bring us assurance and to invite us to walk with him.

Abram received God's assurance. That brings me to the second thing here that Abram received.

And you'll notice it in the text in a very famous verse, verse 6. Abram received really a declaration of God's righteousness. You see that in verse 6.

[18 : 26] he believed the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness. I suppose one of the great perhaps the greatest religious question.

How can a man or a woman be made right with God their creator? How can any human being come into a right relationship with God? On what basis can I be right with God?

How can an unrighteous human being be made righteous before a holy God? Well, we can learn from Abram here because he was someone who came to be counted as righteous in God's eyes.

And this famous text is, I suppose, as you read the passage, you realize it's not part of the conversation between Abram and God. It's actually a comment or an observation that's being made by Moses, perhaps, the writer of Genesis.

Moses. And most commentators believe that it's a kind of summing up of Abram's attitude from the very beginning of the story.

[19 : 31] Abram kept on believing and trusting the Lord. He continued to lean his whole weight upon God. His faith in the Lord remained firm.

He kept on trusting the promises of God. He continued to base his whole life upon what God had told him. And of course, this verse, as you're perhaps aware, is used in a number of places in the New Testament.

Most significantly, I think Paul quotes it in both his letters to the Romans and the Galatians. And in both those places, in both those letters, Paul makes it clear that Abram was counted righteous on the basis of his faith in God's promise.

righteousness. And the key word counted or credited is a kind of accounting term. Abram's faith was credited to him as righteousness. God treated Abram as he was righteous.

And so for Paul, Abram, the great father of biblical faith, stands as a perfect example of a gospel believer. What Abram received through faith was a new standing or a status before God.

[20 : 41] He was justified. He was declared righteous before God. It's not that Abram was made righteous. It is that he was declared righteous. God treated him as righteous.

And that is exactly what happens when we come to put our faith in Jesus Christ. We are declared righteous in God's eyes. Righteousness is credited to our account.

That perfect, complete, wonderful righteousness of Jesus Christ. this is who and what we become through faith in Jesus.

We may feel far from righteous, but our standing before God is not subject to degrees.

It's not about how we feel. It's about what God has declared to be true of us. And that is true of us no matter what. Too many of us base our Christian lives on how we feel about this and that.

[21 : 56] We need to base it on what God has declared to be true of us. Leon Morris writes this, the righteousness we have is not our own, it comes as God's good gift in Christ.

This means more than being pardoned. The pardoned criminal bears no penalty, but he bears a stigma. He is a criminal and he's known as a criminal, albeit one that's unpunished.

The justified sinner not only bears no penalty, he is righteous. righteous. He's not a man with his sins still about him.

Let me ask if you're a man or a woman with your sins still about you, or do you know yourself to have been justified by faith?

I don't know hardly anybody here that you're a Christian. Let me ask you that. I'm not asking if you're a good person. I'm not asking if you've been coming along to church for many, many years.

[23 : 06] I'm not even asking if you believe in God. I'm asking have you come to Jesus Christ? And is he alone the ground of your acceptance with God?

Have you been given this new standing, this new status before God? That righteousness that comes by faith alone? Paul in Romans 4 makes this observation on this very text.

He says, the words that was counted to him were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who was raised from the dead, Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

In other words, these words that we find here in Genesis 15, verse 6, were not written just for Abram, they were not written just for Paul, they were written for us. Saving faith for us is to believe in him who raised Jesus from the dead to trust the promises.

The promise that Jesus' death and resurrection were for our sins and our justification. that's how any man or woman is made right with God, only through faith in Jesus.

[24 : 27] When we're Christ's, and Christ is ours, then his perfect righteousness is ours as well. That's the greatest news of all.

Richard Sibbes, the Puritan, he wrote this, though I have daily experience of my sins, yet there is more righteousness in Christ who is mine than there is sin in me.

There is more righteousness in Christ who is mine than there is sin in me. Abraham received that declaration of God's righteousness and so do we when we put our faith in Jesus Christ.

all time marches on. Abraham receives God's assurance, he receives God's declaration of righteousness and thirdly and finally here, he receives, you'll notice, in verses 7 through 21, at the end of the chapter, God's covenant.

He receives God's covenant. Now Abraham, as we've seen, was concerned about the promises that God made to him. He wanted to know how and when they would be fulfilled.

[25 : 50] He was anxious about the question of an heir and descendants. And in these verses we find that Abraham was also concerned not just about the promise of descendants, he was also concerned about the promise of the land.

How was this to be fulfilled? This promise seemed far from being realized. And he said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.

But he said, O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it? How do I know? How can I really know that this land will be mine?

And my descendants? How can I be certain about your promise, God? And God answers him in a most unusual way. And that follows this very strange, at least to our ears and eyes perhaps, a very strange ritual indeed.

Bring me a heifer, three years old, female goat, three years old, a ram, three years old, turtle dove, young pigeon. He brought them all, cut them in half, laid each half over against each other. He did not cut the birds in half, and when the birds of prey came down, Abram drove them away.

[27 : 04] Now, what's interesting here is that Abram knows exactly what God is doing. Abram knew what to do with these animals. He knew what they were for. This was the way in that ancient culture a covenant or a contract was made between two parties.

God was putting a covenant in place between himself and Abram. Abram already had the promise. Now he was receiving the covenant.

And I suppose a covenant is what God does when he gets formal about a promise. It's the wrapper that God puts around his promise to help us believe it.

Sometimes in our house we might get a kind of Indian takeaway. And if you've had that experience you go to the Indian takeaway they bring the meals either delivered or you go and collect it or whatever else you take the meals out of the bag and they're in these plastic containers.

But sometimes the name of each dish is not written on the container. So no one is sure which dish is which. It would be very confusing.

[28 : 19] It might be a chicken balti. It might be a karahi or a vindaloo or a madras or whatever. How much better it is when the name of the dish is written on the container.

You feel much more confident about what you're going to eat. The writing really helps. promise. And in establishing a covenant God is kind of he's writing on the container called promise.

He wants us to be sure about it. He wants us to know what's inside. He wants us to be confident in tasting and seeing that the Lord is good. So we read in verse 12 the sun going down a deep sleep falls on Abram darkness falls upon him.

The Lord says no for certain your offspring will be sojourners. And there's this promise that the land that is not there will be afflicted for 400 years.

I'll bring judgment on the nation they serve. And afterward they'll come out with great possessions. I think God is very honest what he says to Abram.

[29 : 27] He tells them yes this promise will come to fulfillment but it's going to be a number of years ahead and there'll be much suffering. There'll be much distress but your descendants will be preserved through it.

And sometimes you know an experience of a box of chocolates gets passed around and certainly in our houses don't last terribly long but they get passed around and what invariably happens at the end when all the good ones are taken there's just one or two left and they tend to be hard essentially a nut with a very thin layer of chocolate round about it.

These always seem to be left to the end. The hard bits are left to one side. It's not the case with God. He doesn't leave the hard bits out. Brutally honest about what it means to follow him.

The sun had gone down and it was dark. A smoking fire pot flaming torch passed between these pieces. Verse 17. The Lord on that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram saying to your offspring I give this land.

At the conclusion of this covenant agreement it was sometimes the custom for the parties to walk through the pieces of these torn up animals. How did each of the party know that they were being really serious about this agreement?

[30 : 51] Well they enacted the consequences of failure to honour their part. This is the walking between the pieces of flesh. They have acted out curse.

They were saying if I break the covenant may I be torn in pieces like this animal. There is a passage in Jeremiah 34 that links to this. It is a form of oath.

Not by signing a piece of parchment or a piece of paper but by taking an animal, killing it, cutting it and walking between it. May I be cursed and destroyed if I break my promise to you.

It is a serious business. Covenant making was a serious business. When a king would enter into a covenant with a subject or a servant either both would go through the pieces or more often than not just the servant would go through.

But the thing here is in God's covenant with Abraham you'll notice that it's only God that passes between the pieces. God himself in the form of a blazing smoking torch.

[31 : 58] Verse 17 the smoking fire pot, the flaming torch, they represent God. God's presence, the presence of Yahweh. He passes between the pieces and takes upon himself the curse of the covenant.

It's actually a totally one-sided covenant. Now why does God do this? What is he saying to Abraham and to us in this strange ritual? I think he's giving us another picture and it's a picture of his love.

He's saying he would rather destroy himself than be unfaithful to his promises and to his people. God himself is willing to suffer the curse of a broken covenant.

And it's not just that God is saying well may I be destroyed and be cut off and torn to pieces if I break my promises. It's actually something far more radical. The fact that Yahweh walks through the pieces of the animal alone means that he's saying this.

Even if you break your promise and are unfaithful even then I will take the curse of the covenant for you. Even if you break the promise, even if you are unfaithful, I will take the curse of the covenant for you.

[33 : 17] That is the gospel right here in Genesis 15. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. Of course God keeps his promises.

Of course he is faithful. Of course he is steadfast. He isn't the problem. We are. We are the ones who break the covenant. We are the ones who do not keep his law and his commandments.

The curse of the covenant rests upon us. And so the good news is not that God should take the curse of the covenant. should he break it.

It can never happen. The good news is that in the person of Jesus Christ he takes the curse of the covenant upon himself because we have broken it. Jesus is cut off and crushed and torn to pieces on the cross because of what?

Because of our covenant breaking. It's in the cross that Jesus writes that covenant of grace, and if I put it this way in his own blood, you know what it says?

[34 : 28] It says, I love you with an everlasting love. It says, you will be mine forever. We live in a world where sometimes it's hard, isn't it?

Hold on to those promises of God. Abraham received assurance. He received that declaration of righteousness. He received the covenant. Friends, we can receive all those things as well through faith in a crucified Christ.

It's at the cross that we receive, isn't it, that assurance of God's love. It's at the cross that we receive by faith, that perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, credited to our account.

It's at the cross we receive the blessings, blessings, and not the curses of God's covenant. All that assurance, all that righteousness, all those blessings, ours in Jesus Christ, come to us through the vehicle of faith, not actually by works or sacraments or rituals or religious activities, by faith alone.

I had someone come up to me at my end of my service on Sunday, last Sunday, told me that he really admired Jesus Christ.

[35 : 57] He was a wonderful man. Friends, it's not enough to admire him, not enough to say he's a wonderful man. We actually have to put our faith in him.

We have to put our lives in his hands. We must lean, like Abraham, our whole weight upon the one in whom all the promises of God are yes and amen.

Come on this communion weekend to the word of God and to the table of our Lord Jesus Christ. May he be pleased to meet with us.

Grant us a assurance. May he meet with us and remind us of that great declaration of righteousness that we have in the gospel.

And may he remind us of the covenant and the blessings of that covenant that flow to us through his broken body and his shed blood.

[37 : 07] Let's pray together. Amen. God our Father, we thank you that you are our God.

We thank you that by grace we belong to you. We thank you that we've been bought not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood blood of Jesus Christ.

Lord, we pray for one another that you would meet with us, you would strengthen our faith, that we may walk in a manner worthy of the calling that we've received, that we may be strengthened for every good work.

Lord, if we're struggling with issues and doubts and worries and anxieties, Lord, bring us your assurance, assurance of your love over these days.

And lead us forward in faith. for we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.