

Faith's Questions And God's Answers

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[0 : 00] Let's turn to Genesis 15. Genesis 15, we're going to look at the whole chapter, just scanning through it and looking at the main parts of it.

When you start reading through the Bible, if you begin at Genesis 1, and you read all the way through these chapters leading up to chapter 12, you realize that these first 11 chapters of Genesis really take you very speedily through history.

They cover a lot of centuries at great pace. And then when you come to chapter 12, you're aware of slowing down. You're aware of the fact that now that you've come to Abraham, there is a lot more detail.

This individual takes up so many chapters, and from then on the pace keeps at a rather slower pace than at the beginning, which really shows us that Abraham is such a pivotal figure, not only in Genesis, but in the whole history of redemption, in the whole history of God's church.

Because all the way through to Abraham's life and Abraham's relationship with God, you find that things are moving on towards this covenant, these promises that God has given to Abraham that are then specified as for himself and for his descendants, taking us right through into the whole future history of God's church.

[1 : 33] And it's also important to realize these distinctions in the Bible as you're taken through various types of passages. And as you take the passages to do with Abraham himself into account, you find that these passages seem somewhat disjointed, in a sense, to begin with, until you realize that we're being taken through the life of a man who at almost every stage of his life, at every step of his life, is being tested specifically by God.

And the testings that God puts him through are testings that really affect his life on an everyday basis. They come from everyday events, some of them, many of them.

Some of them are remarkable testings. And that's why we have to keep the chapters to do with Abraham together very closely. If you tried, for example, to take chapter 14, it's not all that long ago since we looked at part of chapter 14, if you try to take this account of Abraham rescuing Lot, Abraham gathering this military force together, going out against these kings that had taken Lot and people from Sodom captive, and then coming to release them and take back their possessions, they took Lot, a son of Abraham's brother.

You might say, if you're looking at that in isolation, you'd say, well, why is that there? What has that really got to do with God's promises? And you might say the same, really, of chapter 15 as well.

When you have this rather strange event of near the end of the chapter, the final part of the chapter, God's promises to him take up part of the chapter, and then you've got verse 17, this strange event of this, in the darkness, this smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passing between pieces of these animals that Abraham has divided as he brought them to God.

[3 : 28] What does that mean? How do you interpret that? Well, if you just look at it by itself, of course it's difficult, but then it fits into this whole pattern of Abraham being tested by God and Abraham at the same time being given further promises by God.

And many of the things that happened in the narrative actually amount to being more or less threats to God's promises and threats to the future, if you like, from a point of view of the darkneses, the powers of evil that work against the church and against Abraham's position as well, though we're not given much specific detail, but you know from the rest of the Bible that that's really what's happening there.

For example, if you go to chapter 12, and at verse 10 there, just immediately after Genesis has begun giving us details about Abraham, the beginning of chapter 12 there especially, well, you come to chapter 12, verse 10, there was a famine in the land, Abraham went down to Egypt, and you know the story, when he entered Egypt, he said to Sarah, he was scared that they would take his wife, and so he passed her off as his sister, and you know the story very well.

Why is that? What is that doing there? Well, it's actually in itself a threat to God's promise that Abraham is going to have an heir and is going to have many descendants from his relationship with Sarah.

That's not specifically mentioned yet there, but you know that that's what's going to happen. And as you read through the narrative, you can see that Abraham himself is putting that under some degree of danger and risk.

[5 : 09] As he's passing off Sarah as no longer his wife, but his sister. And that's why you find that he is very rightly rebuked. And when Pharaoh comes and says to him, why, what is this that you have done to me?

Why did you not tell me she was your wife? Why did you say she is my sister? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and let her go. He was scared. Abraham was scared that they would take Sarah and kill him.

He was placing the promises of God very much not under threat in the absolute sense, of course, because God is always in control of things. But as you read through that narrative, you can see that God's promises to Abraham are always going to be subject to Abraham being tested in regard to them.

And so when you come to chapter 14, that's really where that chapter fits into the whole pattern as well, because here are these kings that Abraham has got to go out and fight with, gather a force together.

What's that all about? Well, the land that's actually spoken of there is the land that God has promised to Abraham for an inheritance. And so when these kings come and invade the land and take Lot captive, they're really acting as if this land belongs to them rather than to God and to his servant Abraham.

[6 : 29] And so when Abraham goes to rectify that situation, you're back on track. You're then seeing, well, God is now showing Abraham again that this promise and this covenant with him is something that is, while it's under attack, yet it's safe in the hand of God.

And Abraham has to rise up and defend it. And he's got to fight for it. And he's being tested as to his own commitment to that covenant. These are just two examples.

But when you come to chapter 15, the question now is, who is going to be Abraham's heir? How is Abraham going to have all of these descendants when his wife is childless?

When his wife at this stage cannot bear children? When they don't have children so that they can call them their own actual offspring, the two of them together.

And God is dealing with that in this chapter. And he comes to the question of, who is going to be my heir? Abraham said, O Lord God, what will you give me?

[7 : 35] For I continue childless and the heir of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus. Now Genesis 15 deals with this issue under two questions and God's answer to these two questions.

Very interestingly, the answer that God gives, I don't have any particular interpretation of this. I'm not sure if it's any spiritual meaning, but it's interesting that God answered the two questions of Abraham in times of darkness.

Took him out in the darkness, showed him the stars. That's how he answered the first question. And the second question that he asked was, how shall I know? So a deep darkness came upon the scene and upon Abraham himself.

And then in that darkness, this strange smoking firepot passed between the pieces of the sacrifice. Let's look at these two questions and God's two answers to them.

Here's the question. First of all, the first one in verse 2. Abraham said, O Lord God, what will you give me? For I continue childless on the air of my house as this Eliezer of Damascus.

[8 : 41] Now that, of course, follows on from the first verse where you've got God's statement. It's in relation to that that Abraham asks his question. The Lord came to Abraham. The word of the Lord came to him in a vision.

Fear not, Abraham. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great. And although that's possible to translate it like the authorized version used to, fear not, Abraham.

I am your shield and your exceeding great reward. It's probably better to take it. Hebrew can be translated this way. I am your shield and your reward shall be very great.

In other words, Abraham is being told, you don't need to worry about your security. I am your shield. I'm your protector. Whatever is going to happen to me has to deal with me, has to go through me, has to confront me, has to confront my truthfulness, my commitment to you and to my promises.

That's what Abraham is being assured here. Fear not, Abraham. I am your shield. And then he secondly says, your reward shall be very great.

[9 : 49] Just preparing Abraham for what he's going to say later on in the chapter as we'll see. His reward is going to be very great. God is going to enrich him hugely with descendants, with possession, with spiritual benefits that he's going to pass on to his descendants.

And incidentally, that reminds us, doesn't it, in a sense really, of the motto that Stornoway itself carries, which sadly today is rather sidelined on the part of many people and many agencies working away against the gospel would rightly like to dispose of it.

God's motto, the Stornoway's motto, God's providence is our inheritance. A great motto that is.

We've got to defend that. Just like Abraham had to defend this inheritance when the kings rose up and threatened to take over the land. We have to defend that inheritance.

That specifies our inheritance. God's providence is our inheritance. And in that providence of God, you look back tonight over that providence and you see some wonderful things that God has blessed us with as a people.

[11 : 03] Things that are now under threat just like Abraham's possession of this covenant and of these promises was under threat. Sometimes by his own foolishness, by his own lack of faith, but mostly through other agencies that were working against this.

That runs right through the whole Bible. God doesn't give us an inheritance so that we can just lay it aside and say, that's fine, Lord. Thank you. You can look after it for me. He gives you an inheritance to prize, to promote, to fight for, to guard.

And that's where we are tonight. What are all these agencies out there doing when they're seeking to do away with the Lord's Day, when they're seeking to secularize the Lord's Day, when they're seeking to take away from public life this Bible and its teaching?

They'll say, well, that's fine. You can have it as a private possession. You can exercise your religion privately or in your church buildings, but don't bring it into the council and don't bring it into Lounter and don't bring it into any of these public agencies that doesn't belong there.

And you have to fight and stand up and say, of course it belongs there. God's truth is for every area of society. And Mr. Sutherland here tonight will fully agree, I know, with the fact that God's truth undergirds our very public justice and every other precious principle by which our society has come to progress from the time that they were founded on the truth of the Bible.

[12 : 43] That's what's under threat. I don't want to spend too much time on that. I hadn't intended really going into it, but it is an issue which is so important and arises from this very statement of God.

I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great. God is our shield. He will look after us. It doesn't matter what you have to say and when you have to say it and what it is you have to defend and who against you defended.

You can depend on God. And your reward shall be very great. What is a greater reward than God's rich providence of blessing in the gospel?

What is a greater reward than that? What would any people want more than that? That's what we have. Now, Abraham's question follows on from that. What will you give me?

For I continue childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus. Now, there's Eliezer who was a servant. He was what you might call a household manager or steward and at that stage Abraham seems to have been focused on him as possibly the person that he would actually hand on the inheritance to or whatever he was going to have to pass on.

[13 : 56] He didn't have any children himself. So this is his great question. Eliezer, this servant, he's no natural son so he says the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus. And God immediately comes to respond to that.

And he does so by first of all assuring him that he is not going to have this Eliezer as his heir. 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 toward heaven and number the stars if you are able to number them.

Then he said to him so shall your offspring be. And he believed the Lord and he counted it to him for righteousness. Wonderful how God works isn't it?

When he wants to assure Abraham of the truth of his promise he takes him outside. He gets him to look up into the heavens to the stars to the creation.

[15 : 01] And he says Abraham look at these. I know you can't number them. But I want to assure you that your descendants are going to be as many as that. You're not going to have a small family.

In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed is what he had said earlier. And now he's reissuing that same promise that same assurance that this is indeed what's going to be true and it will be true as heirs that will come from himself not by anything anyone he adopts not by someone like Eliezer of Damascus but as he'll show later on from him and from his wife Sarah shall come the first of those that will follow in the line of faith.

And he's saying the result of that shall be people without number. And then you come to this really famous verse he believed the Lord and he counted it to him for righteousness.

That of course you know has come to be of huge importance all the way through God's revelation of himself down through the centuries right through the prophets and on into the writings of the apostle Paul.

Because when you go to Romans chapter 4 and Galatians chapter 3 this is exactly the verse that Paul goes back to. He goes back to this moment. He goes back to Abraham looking up into the sky and the fact that he believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness.

[16 : 29] In other words it fits in and it is really the foundational incident if you like of the whole doctrine of justification by faith alone.

And that's where you're at as Paul himself brings that out so fully in Romans and in Galatians. Now the translation there is he believed the Lord but probably again would be best translating the Hebrew by he believed in the Lord because it can carry that meaning and you find that that's how Paul certainly uses it to believe in Christ to believe in this person because faith itself is not the basis of Abraham's righteousness.

His believing is not what gave him the approval and standing that he had with God. God is his standing it's the righteousness of God that really provides the basis for this righteousness that is accredited to Abraham and of course Paul amplifies that and expands on it more fully.

Faith in Christ not our own works not our own merit it's that faith in Christ that by which we come to be justified not for the faith itself but for the one on whom our faith rests.

again you can follow that through in the study of it in the New Testament. So in other words he's saying to Abraham this is something personal it's personal in that it's God he's believing in yes he's believing in God himself as is God God of the promises but of course along with God himself personally there's the word of God verses 4 and 5 you can see that where God the word of the Lord came to him and then he speaks to him verse 5 Luke then he said so shall your offspring be the word of the Lord in other words the Bible you see is not just a collection of ideas it's not something that's just truth as it's come to be defined over the centuries and possibly needs to be redefined again in our own context today this is what theologians usually call propositional truth the Bible is a propositional presentation of details to us in other words it deals with facts this is history this is God working in history this is God assuring us this is who I was for Abraham this is what I said to Abraham this is what I assured Abraham of this is what I was like when I spoke to Abraham and this is what

[19 : 13] I'm like tonight because this is propositional truth it doesn't change it's significant for every generation whatever changes take place in every generation as generation follows another God's propositional truth doesn't need to be changed otherwise it would not be the truth as it is that God has given us so the question what will you give me Abraham is looking for an insight or an answer into how are these descendants going to come from him who is going to be my heir and to whom will this inheritance pass on that's been under threat in the previous chapter and God is assuring him it will come from your own person from your own body your own descendants not this Eliezer your own son your very own son of course you can follow through with the testing can't you right through into the following chapters where

Sarah actually leads Abraham to think that it would be better seeing time is going past and she's not getting any younger neither is Abraham so what does she do she says she offers him her her servant her Egyptian servant Hagar to have a child by her as Abraham actually goes ahead and does you can see again how the whole thing gets skewed until it comes back onto track again after God corrects the matter and gives him the covenant sign of circumcision chapter 17 and then Isaac's birth is promised further and so it goes on and then you come to chapter 22 and what does God require of Abraham now that Isaac is a young man what does he actually say of him take him up to a mountain that I will show you and offer him there as a sacrifice now that's some test Abraham will be asking here what shall you give me seeing I'm going childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus

God answers him and says your offspring shall be your own son your very own heir here's that promise of God fulfilled in Isaac what does Abraham have to do with Isaac he has to sacrifice him he has to put him to death what a test what does Abraham do he does that just when he's ready to bring the knife to Isaac's throat God shouts through the angel and says Abraham Abraham don't lay your hand on the boy for now I know that you fear God Abraham was prepared to go through with it he was obedient to God's command difficult hard though it was and if you go to Hebrews you can get an insight into Abraham's faith there in Hebrews 11 Abraham offered up by faith he offered up

Isaac of whom it was said in you this son of promise this loving son the son whom he loved in whom the promises of God were situated why did he do it how could he do it he did it by faith what does that mean Hebrews 11 tells us for he was persuaded he reckoned that God was able to raise him from the dead God has commanded me to slay my son Isaac I don't understand it fully he might have said it's God's command he knows what he's doing he's shown me that already I received him out of deadness in the first place because my wife Sarah was past the age of childbearing out of that deadness of Sarah's womb I received this child if God can do it once he can do it again so he was going to just go through with it according to God's own command and when God called him to look at the ram caught in the thicket to give that up instead of

Isaac that's what Hebrews calls Abraham receiving Isaac back in a parable literally is what it says because you see for that son of Abraham to be restored from death if you like to put it that way it's equivalent in Abraham's mind to a resurrection from the dead Abraham's being taken along in his understanding of God's promise and God's word bit by bit but he depends upon this God he depends upon his word so can you and I sometimes it's hard to accept it hard to actually believe that God could be saying such a thing but that's what it is with Abraham he accepts what God says and so that's how it comes to be tested once again we spent more time on that much more than I intended but let me just try and finish the second question the second question is how shall I know

[24 : 36] God says in verse 7 I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess but he said oh Lord God how am I to know that I shall possess it that's a very legitimate question don't think that Abraham is actually speaking there out of lack of faith some people take that view why isn't Abraham accepting the word of the Lord he's already assured him of this surely doesn't need to question it again but it's not lack of faith it's faith looking for further assurance and there's nothing wrong with that even the strongest faith can at times seek further assurance further insight further knowledge and that's what Abraham is actually doing there you find the same with Moses Exodus chapter 38 Lord please show me your glory he knew his glory already but then he wants more he wants more insight into that's what

Abraham is doing there and God's answer is so interesting isn't it as the sun was going down a deep sleep fell on Abraham great darkness fell upon him the Lord said know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners this is taking them forward to the time when they are going to be in Egypt and then they're going to leave Egypt after 400 years because the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet complete that's the Canaanite people the debauchery of the Canaanites God would judge them through bringing Israel from Egypt and on into taking and conquering the land of the Amorites and that's what God is saying to him at that point but he then goes through into this rather strange happening when the sun had gone down and it was dark behold a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces on that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham saying to your offspring I give this land now you can see that

God is answering him here through what you could say are signs and seals of a covenant because this is really in the form of making a covenant there's a lot of evidence elsewhere not that we need it the Bible is the truth for us but there's evidence from that time in the ancient near east that very often a covenant was made between various parties by doing this sort of thing by actually taking animals and sacrificing them and dividing them and then passing between the divided animals just as Abraham is actually seeing here the smoking fire pot so that smoking fire pot is actually indicative of God himself the very presence of God himself passing through these pieces of these animals that he has actually divided for this use and the preparation for it is for making a covenant and then the information that you find there in verses 12 to 16 is

God again assuring Abraham of what is going to happen in the future and then he comes to this confirmation verses 17 to 21 this very interesting event and if you look at verse 9 what's interesting there is this I think God says to him bring me a heifer and say to Abraham go and get a heifer and do this with it go and get these animals and these birds and do what I tell you with them what God said to him was bring me a heifer and so on and these other animals and in verse 10 and he brought him all these this is God he was bringing this to God so that the main figure actually there in terms of the event is God this is for God just as it's required by God of Abraham and when he passes this when this smoking fire pot this flaming torch passes between the pieces what is actually happening there well what that signifies is something like this this is death these animals have been killed their blood has been shed they're divided in two and passing between the pieces was indicative of saying that if

I break this covenant let this death come to me that's what God is saying he's assuring Abraham I'm committing myself to this covenant to this promise that I'm giving you in covenant today and if I break it then let this happen to me and of course that God cannot himself die but it's a way of God showing that he is so committed to his promise that he is actually invoking if you like death to come upon himself speaking with all reverence that's really what it indicates just to assure Abraham I am not going to break this promise I am committed to my covenant and the promise is fulfilled by

[30 : 09] God in that way but then of course just in conclusion where does all of this culminate where does this reach its conclusion spiritually if you like well not in Abraham's lifetime not even in the lifetime of the Old Testament this and all the animals of the sacrifices the sacrifices that were given as representative of Christ himself who was to come so too is this because when God in Christ came into this world he came with a view to dying for his people and not only dying for his people but again Paul takes the same imagery and in that same epistle to the Galatians having spoken about justification by faith and

Christ redeeming us from the curse of the law how how did he redeem us from the curse of the law by being made a curse for us you see God is saying to Abraham if I break my promise let me be accursed let me take the death that's deserved of a covenant breaker that's what he did the death we deserved as covenant breakers the death we brought on ourselves that's what God took the person of his son who made him to be sin for us the one who knew no sin so that we might become or be made the righteousness of God in him and isn't that exactly what you were doing just a few days ago

God has established his covenant with his people through the blood of Christ and as he gave Abraham those signs and those seals of his covenant to assure Abraham of God's commitment to his promise he's given us the same different form same principle this is my body which is for you this cup is the new covenant in my blood this do in remembrance of me may God bless these thoughts to us this evening we'll conclude our service this evening singing in Psalm 108 108 on page 146 and at the beginning verses 1 to 5 oh lord god my heart is steadfast and with all my soul

I'll sing harp and lyre I will awaken and my song the dawn will bring lord my god among the nations I will ever give you praise in the midst of all the peoples I will sing of you always verses 1 to 5 to God's praise O Lord God my heart is steadfast and with all my soul I sing harp and lyre I will awaken and my song the dawn will bring lord my god among the nations I will ever sing you praise in the midst of all the peoples

I will sing of you always for your steadfast love is bound greater than the heavens high and your faithfulness towards us reaches even to the sky far above the highest heavens be exalted o my god and through all the earth around us let your glory spread abroad god and I'd like to just have a word with the elders briefly after the benediction just now in the vestry in the session room rather just it'll take less than five minutes if any of you are waiting for a lift from them home now may the grace of the

[35 : 33] Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore Amen