

Text: Genesis 15:1-21

Title: The Abrahamic Covenant Established

Truth: God's Promises are Unbreakable

Date/Location: November 27, 2022 at FBC

Review

Abram has observed the land he is going to enjoy as God's gift. Some major drama happened (the battle for Lot and the kings) in which God upheld the covenant He had announced to Abram in chapter 12. Lot demonstrated bad priorities. We learned about a Biblically important but shadowy figure named Melchizedek.

I. God's Reassurance, v. 1

God already knew what Abram was thinking. In a prophetic vision, He assured Abram of three things:

- A. Do not be afraid. Suppose your nephew were kidnapped and there was a long-term war going on in your region, and there were sexual predators out to get anyone they could in the neighborhood (chapter 19). And suppose that you were really wanting to have a family (and needed to in Abram's case to fulfill God's promise) but you could not have children. Honestly ask yourself: would I be afraid? God commands Abram to NOT be afraid. And why?
- B. God is your protector. That is what it means for God to be a shield. He shields you from harm. "As for God, His way is perfect; the word of the LORD is proven; He is a shield to all who trust in Him" (Ps. 18:30). See also Psalm 7:10. God is not fickle, so He will not leave you. He will even, if the circumstances require, send his angels to help you (Heb. 1:14, Psalm 91:1-16, esp. v. 11).
- C. God is your very great reward. See Num. 18:20. The idea is that God himself is Abram's portion, inheritance, or possession. This is a metaphor for a marvelous friendship relationship between God and Abram. God is better than any possession he might own, particularly in this transient world. "I am His, and He is mine." Abram has a supremely valuable relationship to the Lord which far surpasses any possessions he could take as spoils from war (see chapter 14). You too, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, have an

all-surpassing relationship with God through Christ. Nothing else compares, and if everything else is taken away, you still have Him!

- D. The bottom line is that God will take care of Abram. Since God is the protector *and* the reward for Abram, Abram is naturally going to keep God as his focal point. Anything less would be unreasonable.

II. Abram's Inquiry, v. 2-3

Keeping centered on God is hard, however, because a big expectation in Abram's mind has not been met. We now hear directly from Abram what he was thinking.

- A. The idea of reward induces Abram to ask what God would give him, because he had no heir from his own body. He did not have any children. Without a descendancy, how could God keep most of the promise of Genesis 12:1-3—(1) a great nation; (2) personal blessing; (3) protection from God in terms of the blessing and cursing; and (4) a world-wide blessing? It is probable that Abram is looking at his own age, and that of Sarah, and saying that the time is past to have children. The lack of an heir is a blockade to God's blessing in the covenant and thus to Abram's hope.
- B. We must understand his mindset at that time. Blessing and hope came through a posterity. To have no children was a curse. You may not have thought about that before. Hope was not just a future expectation of dwelling in heaven. It was to have the family (name) carry on in this world. Abram's hope heavily emphasized this life, not the afterlife. "The dust will not praise You" (Psalm 30:9). We have a small sense of that, but with our western individualism so predominant, we lose the urgency of having children.
- C. The promised world-wide blessing comes through the "seed" which is offspring (Gen. 22:18, 26:4, 28:14, once to each of the patriarchs). See also Acts 3:25 and Galatians 3:16. The New Testament makes the point that ultimately the "seed" revolves around a single man, Jesus the Messiah and as such becomes the hope of the entire world.

D. It seemed certain to Abram that the first in line to be his heir was his servant, Eliezer of Damascus. He was faithful, no doubt, but a foreigner. He was subject, not a “proper” heir.

III. Abram’s Belief, v. 4-6

- A. Abram had already believed God before this, with the concrete result that he moved out of Ur, to Haran, and now to the land of the Canaanites and Perizzites.
- B. God says that Eliezer will *not* be the heir of everything Abram has when he dies. That is contrary to Abram’s best educated guess. Rather, a natural-born son will be the heir. To illustrate just how many people would arise from this heir, God led Abram outside of the tent and told him to look at the stars. They were innumerable, and God said that is what Abram’s descendance would look like. Millions upon millions of Hebrews would come from his line of humanity—from nothing to huge numbers.
- C. Abram believed God. His trust arose from His personal knowledge and experience of God’s kindness toward him. He had heard of God; he had interacted with God; he had experienced God’s loving care, protection, mercy, and provision; he had followed God’s direction; he heard God’s words. This established a trusting relationship between the two. Moses, the human author of Genesis, is telling us that Abram at this point had made his decision. He would be a follower of the one true God. He was abandoning all the idols from his past life.
- D. God ordained that on such a basis—the trust relationship of a person toward Him—that He would grant a right standing to the person, even though they did not deserve such. The text says, “He [God] accounted it [his faith] to him [Abram] for righteousness. The means of this right standing was what we call “accounted righteousness.” How can a person be right with God? Only through trust and the resulting accounting of righteousness by God.

Abram was not perfectly righteous. He was in fact a sinful person who had lied about his wife and had probably been involved in idolatry earlier in his life. So how did God make Him righteous? God took His own righteousness in Jesus Christ, in advance of

Jesus's life and death, and reckoned it to be Abram's own even though it was not. This is not God's attribute of righteousness, for that cannot fully be shared with anyone. What God did was consider and treat Abram as righteous, even though he was not in fact that. God could do that rightly and justly without "pretending" because Jesus took Abram's sin upon His shoulders and paid for it all, so it became as if Abram did nothing wrong. What he did do wrong was justly disposed in the death of Christ. Thus, Abram stands righteous before God, with nothing blameworthy to his account. Abram stood before God as Christ stands before God, blameless. Christ's righteousness is imputed to the believer—not in the sense that he is treated as having actually done *His* Mosaic-law-keeping conduct, but that his **standing** before God as perfect is shared to us—which standing was proven in our Lord's conduct while here on earth.

- E. Read this: Romans 4:20-25. Then apply it to yourself. To you also it (righteousness) will be credited provided you believe in God who raised Jesus up from the dead. If you share the trusting relationship with God that Abram had with God, then you will share in the righteousness imputed to Abram. You too will be right with God. The Bible offers no other way to have that kind of standing with God.

IV. God's Unbreakable Promise, v. 7-21

- A. The Lord speaks again to Abram and identifies Himself as the one who brought Abram out of Ur to the land he would inherit. Abram asked for assurance / proof that he would inherit it. Because Abram believed God, I do not interpret this request as a challenge or one of doubt, but of the genuine need for assurance.
- B. You too probably crave assurance in your relationship with God. How to know? This is an important question with a multi-faceted answer, but there is one major part of the answer that you should not overlook. It is like the answer Abraham received from God.
- C. The narrator now tells us in verses 9-21 that God enacted a covenant ratification ceremony after the traditional fashion of the ancient near east, but with a twist. In the typical ceremony,

animals would be split in two pieces. The covenant parties (say, two men) would walk between the pieces, signifying that if they broke the terms of the covenant, they agreed that they should be killed just as the animals were. “I will perform this oath, on penalty of death...”

- D. In this ceremony, Abram prepared the animals—heifer, goat, ram, turtledove, and young pigeon, five in all. The birds were too small to split, I suppose, but the others he laid out in the traditional fashion, one piece opposite its other half with a space between them. The Lord did not initiate the ceremony until apparently some hours later, so Abram had to drive away the carrion birds.
- E. Evening came and the sun descended below the horizon. Abram fell into a sleep. Because of this (supernatural) sleep came the twist: he was unable to participate in the ceremony.
- F. Abram felt a horror and great darkness. It was like a nightmare, in a way. He was told that his descendants would be enslaved for four centuries with brutal bondage. This was a horrifying thought. But God would judge those people and the descendants of Abram would leave (Egypt) with great possessions, voluntarily given to them by the nation that had oppressed them. They received a part of their wages this way, but their dignity could never be returned to them for the generations that died in slavery. Abram heard God tell him that he would die at a good old age, and the nation would return to the land of promise once the sin of the Amorites was fulfilled.
- G. In verse 17, the appearance of God in the form of a smoking oven and burning torch passed between the pieces. His presence lighted the darkness around the initiatory sacrifices. But Abram did not walk between the animal parts. This symbolized that the covenant was lopsided. God guaranteed the covenant’s performance regardless of Abram or his descendant’s faithfulness to it and obligated himself to the same fate as the dead animals if He did not carry it out. This is a sign that the Abrahamic covenant is absolutely irrevocable, no matter if the circumstances we perceive from our limited vantage point seem to demand otherwise.

H. The covenant is thus sealed—officially “made” between God and Abram. He specifically promises the land from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates, and all the peoples that reside there at the time, would be under the control of Abram’s people, the Israelites, in time to come and ultimately forever.

Conclusion

Back to your question of assurance: how can you know that if you trust God, He will indeed ensure that righteous standing to you forever? As much as He did for Abram—promising to die like the split-in-two animals if He did not keep the covenant—He did even more for us. He sent His Son to actually die to seal our redemption. He walked among sinners (John 1:14), with those who sat in great darkness (Matt. 4:16), as the light of the world (John 8:12). He died *alone* to purge our sins (Heb. 1:3). We do not participate in the manufacture of our redemption. We trust Him, just like Abram trusted God. And God imputes righteousness to us just like He did to Abram. Thanks to be the Lord of all, the most high God, possessor of Heaven and earth. The God of Abraham praise, for His mercy endures to all generations.

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