

FAITH IN GOD'S PROMISES
GENESIS 15

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The winter of 1621 was extremely difficult for the Pilgrims. By spring half of their number who had left Holland and England the previous summer were dead. The deaths of 2996 people on 9/11 is rightfully regarded by us Americans as a horrible tragedy. Israelis have pointed out that the loss of some 1200 people on October 7 involved a much higher proportional loss of their citizens as compared to our 9/11. Imagine the effect of a 50% death rate in less than one year for the Pilgrims and their companions who came to the New World.

Not all of the occupants of the Mayflower were Christians, but at least half of them were. Those Pilgrims were convinced that they were following the will of God in going across the Atlantic. Their specific motives were varied. They were concerned that their young people were being corrupted by the culture in Holland. They were looking for economic opportunities in the New World. They wanted a place where they could practice their Christian faith unhindered. They also wanted to make an impact upon the world for Jesus. Governor William Bradford wrote in his diary that one of their chief motives was **“the propagating and advancing the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world.”**

In the spring of 1621 it was not even clear that they were going to be able to survive. They were not well equipped to live in New England. They did not have the skills to survive in this new environment. It was in March of 1621 that a native American named Samoset wandered into their camp. He greeted them in English, having learned a bit of the language from English fishermen. He helped the Pilgrims connect with a local tribe of Wampanoag Indians. Through that connection they also met Squanto, who probably spoke better English than any other native American in all of North America. Not only that but he also may have been a Christian, having lived in Europe for a number of years. It was through Squanto that the Pilgrims learned the skills that they needed to survive in Massachusetts.

When Squanto died in late 1622 Governor William Bradford described him as **“a special instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation.”** Clearly the providential care of God was involved in the challenging experience of the Pilgrims in the New World and in the celebration of that first Thanksgiving in 1621. Jesus was with them in their humble efforts to fulfill the commission of Jesus to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth.

In the most challenging experiences of life the temptation we face is to wonder if Jesus is really with us. The Apostle Paul in Romans #8 promises Christians that all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose.

That working together for good is not always clear in the difficult situations which we encounter in life.

Certainly it was not always obvious to Abraham in the Old Testament. God had provided assurances to Abraham that he was with him. He also promised Abraham that he would make of him a great nation. Abraham was an older man, and he did not have any kids. We saw last week in #14 of Genesis that Abraham and his forces gained a great victory over a much larger confederation of city-states. In the process he rescued his nephew Lot from this enemy. God was clearly present with them in that victory. But now he had to face the possibility of a return visit from this northern confederation, and he still did not have any kids of his own.

Spring was the time when kings usually went out to war. During the preceding winter Abraham had time to consider the fact that his name had become well known to the leaders of these four northern and eastern city-states. (NORTHERN ALLIANCE MAP) The army that this alliance had put together the previous year had been humiliated by a much smaller and less impressive force. There was little doubt that they now knew something about Abraham. Abraham had to be aware of the likelihood that they would like to meet him again. Only they would not be planning to be a blessing to Abraham. This northern alliance might well want to return to the south to pay Abraham a visit.

I.

So in vv. 1-5 of Genesis #15 we find that GOD'S PROMISES CAN BE TRUSTED. (I. GOD'S PROMISES CAN BE TRUSTED.) In v. 1 of Genesis 15 God appears to Abraham in a vision and says, "**Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.**" Why would Abram need a shield? The logical conclusion is that Abram feels a need for protection. From what does he feel a need for protection? He recognizes that he and his forces have humiliated this northern alliance. There is a real danger that they might come back looking for him. The Lord tells him not to worry.

The Lord gives Abram an additional assurance. He says, "**Your reward shall be very great.**" The original Hebrew word and its grammatical form for "great" imply quantity. God appears to be talking about lots of descendants. After concern for his own safety and the safety of the people around him, Abraham's interest is in having descendants. This is how he understands the promise of a great reward. For in v. 2 he reminds the Lord that he is childless.

The outward circumstances make the fulfillment of the promise of many descendants doubtful. Thus Abraham says in v. 3, "**Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.**" It was customary in that culture for a childless couple with significant material resources to adopt an heir. Usually a household servant was chosen. This servant's responsibility was to take care to see that the patriarch was cared for in his old age and that burial arrangements were properly handled. After the master's death the heir would receive the inheritance. He would take over as leader of the clan. Verse 2 says that Eliezer of Damascus has been chosen for this position.

In v. 4 God says, **“This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.”** The Lord apparently believes in the literal interpretation of His promises. He then takes Abram outside for an astronomy lesson. He tells him to look up and start counting. (NIGHT SKY) In the dry air of that Canaanite night which was unaffected by artificial light many stars were visible.

The latest estimate is that there are 70 billion trillion stars in the universe--- that is 7×10 to the 23rd power. According to *Sky and Telescope* magazine only about 9000 of those stars are visible from the earth with the naked eye. Only half of those or less are visible at one time. God’s point is clear. Abraham can know upon the authority of the God of the universe that he is going to have lots of descendants. God’s promises can be trusted. In the midst of the challenges of life, will we believe the promise of Romans 8:28 that all things work together for good to those who love God? One of the lessons of our passage is that God’s promises can be trusted.

II.

In v. 6 we learn that GOD’S PROMISES REQUIRE FAITH. (II. GOD’S PROMISES REQUIRE FAITH) Verse 6 says, **“And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”** In Hebrew the word for “believed” is *heamen*, from which we eventually get our word “amen.” It is the first time that that this word appears in the Bible.

Our reading of this verse might leave us with the impression that it is at this point that Abram finally puts his trust in the true God. But it is more likely that the author is making a general statement, something to the effect that Abram was a believer in the Lord.

Abraham had exercised faith when he first left Ur in Sumaria. According to Hebrews #11 v. 8 (HEBREWS 11:8), **“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.”** He exercised faith when he built altars in the promised land. He exercised faith when he gave Lot the first choice of the land. He exercised faith when he attacked the northern alliance. He exercised faith now when he listened to the Lord’s renewed promise of many descendants. (PROJECTOR OFF)

One of the fundamental questions which every religion must answer is: How can we be made right with God, or the gods? What is required of us to be accepted by the Divine? Genesis #15 v. 6 provides the answer of the God of the Bible. It is belief. It is a trusting faith. Abram believed the Lord.

The basic root meaning behind this Hebrew word “believe,” and its noun form “faith,” is “certainty” or “firmness.” “To believe” in the Hebrew Bible means “to believe with assurance or certainty.” That understanding is different from the way in which believing and faith is often regarded in our culture. In our society faith is often associated with uncertainty. It involves something that is hoped to be true but may not be. It is often set

over in contrast to science, which provides us with real facts and understandings about the world and can be trusted.

It was the Biblical confidence in the God of creation and history that was the key to Abram's acceptance before God. It is this kind of faith and belief that has been required throughout all of Biblical history. Man's tendency is to do something to earn acceptance from God. In the time of Jesus and the Apostle Paul the thinking of the vast majority of Jewish priests and rabbis was that keeping the Old Testament law brought acceptance from God. Some strains of Christianity require a similar behavior. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 3:28) But the Apostle Paul declared in Romans #3 v. 28, **"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."**

The role of law and works and faith was a key issue in the New Testament Book of Galatians, the study of which we recently concluded. The Apostle Paul was convinced that these people to whom he had ministered in cities of Asia Minor had truly become Christians. They had believed the Gospel. They had trusted in Jesus. But now they were beginning to buy into the teaching of Jews who claimed to be Jesus followers but who also said that it was necessary to follow the Old Testament law to be completely right with God.

Thus Paul declared in Galatians #3 v. 10 (GALATIANS 3:10), **"For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'" In the next verse (GALATIANS 3:11) he adds, "Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"**

In Paul's development of his argument in Galatians about the foundational role of faith he refers to Abraham. He cites this verse from Genesis 15 in our passage. Here it is in Galatians 3 v. 6 (GALATIANS 3:6): **"Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."**

In our study of Galatians #2 we saw reference made to Paul's dramatic conversion on his trip to Damascus. In v. 17 of #2 reference is made that he went away to Arabia for a couple of years soon after this. The suspicion of many is that Paul used this time to restudy the Hebrew Scriptures. He had been well trained as a rabbi in the Hebrew Scriptures. But with his conversion he had to rethink his understanding of the Jewish Bible. I am suspicious that one of the passages that he spent significant time thinking about was Genesis 15 v. 6. For he cites it and talks about it not only in Galatians #3 but also in Romans #4.

In Galatians #3 Paul follows up his citation of this Genesis reference in v. 6 in the following two verses. (GALATIANS 3:7) He writes beginning in v. 7, **"Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. (GALATIANS 3:8) And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'" Notice the application of the Abrahamic blessing to Gentiles.**

Theologians point out that there are three aspects of Biblical faith. **First**, there is necessarily an object of faith. (PROJECTOR OFF) Abraham believed in the Lord. A Muslim may have all kinds of faith, faith that motivates him even to kill himself for the sake of holy war, but if the object of that faith is Allah, he will not be acceptable to the true God. A Hindu may have all kinds of faith, but if the object of his faith is Krishna or Vishnu or Shiva, he will not be acceptable to the true God.

The **second** aspect of Biblical faith is assent, or agreement about the truth. That still does not result in salvation. In James #2 v. 19 the Bible says that even the demons believe. In other words they have an intellectual recognition of the truth about God and Jesus. This step is necessary to have saving faith, but it is not sufficient.

The **third** aspect of Biblical faith is trust. I grew up in Wisconsin. In the winter I sometimes went ice fishing with my father. At a certain point it becomes cold enough to walk out on lakes and even drive cars on the ice. The first aspect of faith is the object of faith. It is ice that is thick enough to support the weight of a person and even a vehicle. The second aspect is assent. It is the mental conviction that the ice is strong enough to hold a person or a vehicle. It is seeing that other people and other vehicles are going out on the ice. But the third aspect of faith, trust, is present only when one ventures out on the ice himself or herself.

The product of faith in the true God is righteousness. In Hebrew that means conformity to a moral or ethical standard, in this case, to the holiness of God. But notice that our text does not say that Abraham was made righteous. Rather it says that faith in the true God was counted to him as righteousness. God declared that this faith is sufficient. It is credited to Abraham's account as righteousness.

So also today when we believe in the true God, we are not made righteous. We are still sinners. But we are justified. We are declared to be righteous by God. We are legally pardoned.

Though we live 4000 years after the time of Abraham, the method of being declared righteous is the same. It is faith in the true God. What has changed is our understanding of the God who is there. We have the Old and New Testament available to us. Most importantly we live after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Today we are accountable to God for our response to the One who was sent to provide the payment for our sins. Saving faith today means believing in Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world. God's promises require faith from us.

III.

The remaining verses of Genesis 15 remind us that **GOD'S BEST PROMISES RELATE TO HIS COVENANTS**. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. GOD'S BEST PROMISES...) We find in vv. 7-21 a further reassurance from the Lord that His promises to Abraham will be fulfilled. The promise is repeated that Abraham and his descendants will possess the land of Canaan. In response to Abraham's further questioning, the Lord initiates a

covenant ceremony. This ceremony seems to reflect a means that was used for individuals or city-states to make agreements. The signing ceremony involved sacrificing certain animals and dividing their bodies in half. Those making the agreement would pass between the two halves indicating their intention to abide by the terms of the agreement. The implication was that to fail to abide by the agreement would mean death to the offending party.

So Abraham gets the animals and divides the bodies of the heifer, goat, and ram. Then he waits for further instructions. While he is waiting, birds of prey come down to feed on the carcasses. Some commentators have speculated that these birds are intended to symbolize threats to this covenant that is being signed.

As the sun sets, Abraham falls asleep. Verse 12 says that a thick and dreadful darkness comes upon him. Perhaps this darkness is a premonition, or warning, of the difficult times that will come for his people, parties to the covenant. For in v. 13 God tells Abraham that his descendants will be slaves in a foreign land for 400 years. There is further suffering and delay that awaits them before these promises will be fulfilled. The Lord seems to be describing the slavery that will happen to the children of Israel in Egypt. Perhaps there is also a foreshadowing here of the crucifixion, during which the gospels tell us that darkness covered the earth.

In v. 14 God says that ultimately He will curse His enemies, and He will prosper His people. God's promises will be fulfilled. Egypt will be judged, and the Israelites will come out with many possessions. Then finally they will occupy the land. This vision is both helpful and horrible to Abraham. There is assurance of ultimate fulfillment of the promises. But there is also a vision of the terrible suffering that his people will experience.

In v. 15 there is an assurance that Abraham will go to his fathers in peace. There is a comfort and an encouragement in this that there is a meaningful and worthwhile existence that lies beyond the grave. This future existence implies a renewed relationship with his fathers, which would include his father Nahor and ancestors going all the way back to Noah and beyond.

In v. 17 we are told, **“When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.”** (ANCIENT OVEN) The smoking oven was probably a portable oven that was heated with a torch. These smaller ovens pictured here were made of clay and were portable.

The Lord occasionally manifested Himself to His people in the Old Testament through fire. He appeared to Moses in a burning bush. He manifested Himself in a pillar of fire that led the children of Israel by night in the exodus. It appears that He is now making an appearance in this oven and flaming torch. (PROJECTOR OFF)

God had told Abraham to prepare the ingredients for the covenant ceremony. But notice who passes between the remains of the animals. It is only the Lord. Abraham merely

watches. This has tremendous significance. It signifies that God is the only one obligated to fulfill the agreement. Abraham bears no responsibility. The fulfillment of the terms of this covenant is dependent upon God alone. The fulfillment of the promises contained therein is dependent upon a sovereign God. Thus this is referred to as an unconditional covenant. No matter what any humans do or don't do this covenant is sure to eventually come to pass.

In the last four verses of the chapter the Lord gives the first specific boundaries of the promised land. (PROJECTOR ON--- PROMISED LAND MAP) He says that it will stretch from the River of Egypt, either a wadi known as the Brook of Egypt or the Nile River, to the Euphrates. In the time of King Solomon the nation of Israel reached its greatest extent. But it did not occupy the entire territory described in this unconditional covenant. It also did not possess the land permanently, as the Lord had promised. This covenant has not yet been fulfilled. But because God has bound Himself to it, the terms will eventually be fulfilled. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Notice one other thing in v. 18. Until now the Lord has used the future tense in talking about giving the land to Abraham. In #12 v. 7 and #13 v. 15 He said, "I will give you this land." Now He says, "I have given it to you." Ownership of the land is now formally given to Abraham by this covenant. It remains for his descendant Joshua to actually begin to take possession of it.

God's promises are enough for His people. But to give Abraham the faith necessary to endure coming trials, He appears to him and makes an unconditional covenant with him. The challenges to the faith of Abraham and his descendants will continue. But in spite of suffering and death, the fulfillment of those promises is sure. God's promises to the church of Christ and to us as individual believers are likewise sure to be fulfilled. They may be delayed. They may be preceded by suffering and even death. But God's Word and God's promises will come true.

Just as God had a covenant with His people in the Old Testament, He also has a covenant with His church today. (PROJECTOR ON--- HEBREWS 8:6) Hebrews #8 describes this new covenant. In v. 6 the author writes, "**But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.**" The promises of the New Testament for us are based on this covenant. The certainty and trustworthiness of this covenant are guaranteed by the death of Jesus Christ. He signed this covenant with His blood.

In Hebrews #9 v. 15 (HEBREWS 9:15) we have this additional information about the new covenant: "**Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.**" The Old Testament covenants required animal sacrifices. The requirement of these animal sacrifices pointed to the seriousness of sin and the need for shedding of blood for the covering of sins. This new covenant also involves death, but it is the death

of the perfect sacrifice, the God-man Jesus Christ, who pays the penalty for sin once and for all. The promise of an eternal inheritance, an eternal life, is granted simply on the basis of faith in this Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

William Carey took the promises of God's Word seriously. He read the last three verses of the Gospel of Matthew which speak of the church's responsibility to bring the good news about Jesus to the end of the earth. He also read the promise of Christ in the last verse of that Gospel: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

As I have pointed out, William Carey was a shoemaker by trade with a limited formal education. But once he became a follower of Jesus he began studying Greek and Hebrew and Latin. Eventually he was asked to become a pastor of a small Baptist church. He read the story of Captain Cook's voyages around the globe. He dreamed about the possibilities of bringing the gospel to some of these places.

At a pastor's meeting in 1787 he shared his ideas with a group of fellow clergymen. He was not well received. A senior member of the group responded to the presentation with words that were very close to this: **"Here we have an example of a young man who knows nothing about the plan of God. The Almighty does not need a man to speak for Him. He will enlighten the heathen in His own way, when He sees fit. It is not our place to interfere with this process. And you, young man, are a miserable enthusiast for suggesting otherwise."**

With that, the discussion ended. It was discouraging to this future missionary. But William Carey continued to think about the issue. He put his thoughts into a manuscript. A couple of young pastors read it and supported his thinking. They told him that it needed to be published. He had no money for such an undertaking, and the other pastors didn't either. But then he got connected with a young businessman who liked the manuscript and agreed to underwrite the cost of it. It was given this short, catchy title: *An enquiry into the obligations of Christians to use means for the conversion of the heathen in which the religious state of the different nations of the world, the success of former undertakings, and the practicability of further undertakings are considered.* The title was too long to be included in the New York Times Best Seller list. But there were Christians who were interested in the ideas put forth in his book. Out of that a missionary society developed. Eventually the medical doctor from India, John Thomas, appeared on the scene.

William Carey sensed that God was directing him to India. He claimed the promise of Matthew 28:20 that as Christ's disciples sought to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth, He would be with them. But there were great obstacles. Two of his children died in these early years. His wife became extremely depressed. Initially she refused to go off to India. There were other significant challenges that awaited in India.

The challenge of the Great Commission in Matthew's Gospel was also a motivating factor for the Pilgrims. They also faced great challenges and difficulties.

The certainty of the fulfillment of God's promises in spite of suffering and difficult circumstances requires a response of faith from us. One of my seminary professors, a man by the name of Howard Hendricks, once wrote, **"God never tells you He won't put you in the fire. What He has said is He won't put you in the fire alone. Faith is not only the means of entrance into the Christian life; it is the means of growth in the Christian life. Faith flourishes in the fire. I am convinced that God will not use you greatly until He tests you thoroughly. When He has tested you thoroughly, don't be surprised if He picks you as His instrument to accomplish purposes that you didn't dream would ever be accomplished through your life. My deep prayer for you is that God will give you faith, vision, and courage equal to your opportunity."**

God's promises will be realized. The promises contained in His covenant with Abraham and His covenant with the church will be fulfilled. Will we have a part in their fulfillment? Will we have the faith to endure, and to trust the promises that He has given to us, even in the face of difficulties?