

GENESIS

15:1-21

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Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday morning, 29th October 2023 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: Romans 4:1-4

Introduction

This morning we are going to study Genesis chapter 15 – a chapter that J Vernon McGee describes as one of the high points of the Bible. And he's not wrong. But there are so many high points that it's really like looking at a mountain range of God's goodness, interspersed by valleys of man's wickedness. This particular high point, in short, will see God establish an everlasting *non-conditional* covenant with Abram. A covenant that was made roughly 2000 years before Christ, and still stands now some 2000 years after Christ's birth.

Now, as a quick recap — we were introduced to Abram at the very end of chapter 11 (at the end of the genealogy from Noah's son, Shem), and in chapter 12 we see God command Abram to go to the land of Canaan, promising that he will make him a great nation. Then, when Abram reached the land, God promised that He would give it to Abram's descendants.

But chapter 12 doesn't end so well, with Abram heading off to Egypt of his own accord in a time of famine, rather than trusting God's provision. Chapter 13 sees Abram return to the land of Canaan, and a parting of ways with his nephew Lot, who decides where to live based on what his eyes saw, rather than what God had said. A reminder for those of us that are uncles, that the decisions we make may well have an effect on our nephews or nieces, on the eyes that are watching us.

Then last week in chapter 14 we saw the consequence of Lot's choice, not only to move *towards* Sodom, but to live *in* it — as he was taken captive. Abram literally came to his rescue, bringing back both Lot, his possessions, and the people that were taken captive with him. And then we read that remarkable account of Melchizedek — who not only foreshadowed *our* King and High Priest, Jesus (even bringing out bread and wine), but also made clear that it was *God* that had brought Abram the victory against the 4 kings that had taken Lot captive in the first place.

Overview of chapter fifteen

That brings us to chapter 15 then, and usually I break down the chapter that we're studying into it's various topics or sections — but to do so with this chapter is unnecessary, for it has a singular focus. That is, the establishment of God's covenant with Abram that I mentioned a moment ago. Out of 21 verses we'll find that 13 (so more than half of them) in full or in part record God speaking, while just 3 record Abram speaking. And that gives a good indication of Who we'll see instigated this (and it wasn't Abram!).

Chapter fifteen

Jumping straight into verse 1 then, we read:

Genesis 15:1

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward."

So, after *what* things? Well, the events of chapter 14 — Lot's captivity and rescue by Abram. And we see the first thing God says to Abram is "do not be afraid". Why? Well perhaps two reasons. First, he had just attacked 4 kings that not only had armies, but empires. It's not that he was wrong to do so, but may have (at least in human terms) understandably felt he had made great enemies. Second, upon returning from battle, he had turned down the offer of material possessions from the king of Sodom that it would not be to his credit that he had made Abram rich.

And so the Lord *assures* him of two things. He was his shield. And He was his great reward. Of course, when we look back at the last chapter, we see that although Abram had some good tactics, it was God who gave him the victory, as stated by Melchizedek. And so if God, who made all things, and was all powerful, was able to give Abram the victory *then*, He was still able to protect him *now*. He was saying to Abram, "you can trust that *I* will protect you".

But God says more, saying "*I* am your exceedingly great reward". That is, whatever Abram could have received from the hand of the king of Sodom, was insignificant compared to what he had in God Himself. Not *merely* his reward. Not merely a *great* reward. But an *exceedingly* great reward.

And the same is true for us. There is no greater gift we can ever receive than a personal relationship with our Creator, for it is in Him — and not the things He blesses us with — that we will find our richest blessing. A number of the songs we sing declare the same thing.

We sing "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine", going on to sing "I in my Savior am happy and blest;"

And also "Jesus, everything I've lost I have found in You. When I finally reach the end I'll say You are worth it all." going on to sing "There's no riches, Earthly treasure, That will satisfy".

And more recently "'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus, Just from sin and self to cease, Just from Jesus simply taking, Life and rest, and joy and peace".

The trouble is, we think "I can't be happy unless I'm married". or "I can't be happy unless I have children", or "own a home". Or "own a bigger home". Or "have that car". Or "that phone". Or we think "I can't be happy unless people like me." Or "unless I get that promotion" or "pay rise", "holiday", or "retirement plan". But the reality is you can have all those things and still not be truly happy.

This is because we were not designed to find our worth, our value, or our happiness in *things*. Or even people. But rather we were designed for communion with God. For relationship with *Him*. We read in Colossians:

Colossians 2:6-10

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; **and you are complete in Him**, who is the head of all principality and power.

It is not a spouse that completes you. It is not your accomplishments. It is Christ. And nothing, or no-one else.

As one commentator noted, Jesus didn't say "I'm going to show you the way", but rather "I am the Way". He didn't say "I'm going to give you bread", but rather "I am the Bread". And he didn't say I'm going to share truth with you, but "I am the truth". It is Jesus Himself in whom we will find our satisfaction. Jon Courson offers this encouragement:

Those who come to the Lord not looking for something from Him, but simply to cling to Him find all kinds of blessing in all sorts of areas they never expected. Are you disappointed with God because you asked Him for something you have yet to receive? Maybe it's because you're looking for some thing. God loves you too much to toss a boxed little package your way. The issue is bigger; and He wants you to discover today that He will satisfy your need; that He will be your reward.

Jon Courson

So, are you clinging to Jesus? Is your walk with Him precious to you? Or are you chasing around hoping that something or someone else will make you truly happy?

A challenge I've shared many times before is the following statement by Ben Patterson:

Perhaps one reason God delays answers to our prayers is because He knows that we need Him, more than the things we ask of Him.

Ben Patterson

And if we look at what happens over this chapter and next, we'll see that Abram and Sarai wrestled with this. This is a very honest account.

We read in verses 2 & 3:

Genesis 15:2-3

But Abram said, "Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!"

Perhaps missing the enormity of what God had just said, Abram looks at his situation, knowing that God had *promised* an heir, but he *had* none. He looks at what isn't happening, not necessarily doubting God *can* work in his situation, but can't see *how* God will work in his situation.

But God is patient with Abram, and we read on:

Genesis 15:4

And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir."

That is, things would not work out how Abram feared, and God would indeed provide an heir for Abram — He would indeed provide a son.

Genesis 15:5

Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

I wonder if God left a pause here, allowing Abram to try counting... 1, 2, 3, 4, 5... 858, 859... and so on! What God was saying was that there was no way Abram could number or comprehend how many descendants He would give him — for it would be millions upon millions upon millions. And that's just his physical descendants, not even including those such as ourselves who are Abram's spiritual seed, as the Bible puts it in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

And the same God who could do more than Abram could comprehend, can do more than you and I can comprehend. We read in Ephesians:

Ephesians 3:20-21

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

That's not to say we'll get more than we ask for — in fact, if we ask for things simply for our flesh, God won't give us those things at all. But when it comes to what God is able to do in and through us for our genuine good and His glory, He is able to do more than we can imagine.

Here, God had promised Abram that not only would he have an heir, but his descendants would be immeasurable in number. What was Abram's reaction?

Genesis 15:6

And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

So while on one hand Abram had focussed on his problem (not on his Provider), when God spoke, Abram believed Him. And in this, Abram is an *incredible* example of faith. Indeed, Paul builds Romans chapter 4 on this very moment in Abram's life, explaining that all that God did for Abram was by grace, and accepted by faith — it wasn't earned. He writes there:

Romans 4:1-4

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

As I've said before; *if you could earn your salvation, God would owe it to you, and it would no longer be by grace* — in the same way that you would not consider your employer gracious for paying you for the work you have done.

So then, the sum total of what Abram did was believe. Yes, he showed faithfulness and obedience in other moments of his life. But right here, he simply believed — and God accounted it to him for righteousness. We read later in Romans 4:

Romans 4:16

Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all

And so, Paul says, *our* salvation is by faith — in our case we are *not* trusting in what God has said He *will* do, but in what He has *already done*. Specifically, we read in verse 23 on:

Romans 4:23-25

Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offences, and was raised because of our justification.

That is, if we approach God in repentance and faith — not merely believing that He *exists*, but that He sent His Son Jesus to die for us, and pay for our sin — then we will be saved. Indeed, we will be seen as righteous, because we have approached God in faith, believing He has *done all* that is necessary for our salvation.

Now, what follows in the remainder of this chapter further reinforces this amazing truth. We read:

Genesis 15:7

Then He said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it."

So we see God tell Abram — I led you here! I called, you obeyed, and now I will bless you with an inheritance. And friends, God has done the same for us. He called us to Him, and (if we have individually put our faith in Jesus), then He has not only saved us, but given us an inheritance in Him — an eternity in His presence, a blessing beyond description.

But look at Abram's response:

Genesis 15:8

And he said, "Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?"

Again, Abram doesn't doubt God is able — but wants to know how he will know. So God responds:

Genesis 15:9

So He said to him, "Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon."

Any you might be thinking "what on earth is going on here". Well, this is going to be quite the object lesson. Abram will prepare what the Lord tells him to. And God will do all that is needed with it. And what God is initiating is the equivalent of a modern day contract — that is, a relationship of commitment. Now usually, as with contracts today, you need the two parties present or in agreement whom the contract is to be between, with conditions on both parties as to what their responsibilities and commitments are as part of it. But we see something different take place here.

First we read that Abram obeyed God's instruction:

Genesis 15:10-11

Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

The custom of the day when entering into a legal agreement was to divide an animal, stand in the middle of those two pieces, and take hold of each others wrists to show they were deadly serious about keeping their side of the deal. This custom is also referenced in Jeremiah 34:18.

And here is Abram, having literally divided each animal in two (except the birds), and ready to enter into this agreement, that He might *know* the Lord would indeed bless him with this inheritance. But before that occurs, we read in verse 12:

Genesis 15:12

Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him.

So it seems Abram is incapacitated — he's in a deep sleep. But as he sleeps, we read "horror and great darkness fell upon him". Why the horror? It is surely what God revealed to Abram as he slept, with his family, Israel, being captive in Egypt, and being afflicted by the Egyptians — for we read:

Genesis 15:13

Then He said to Abram: "Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years.

Clearly God is talking about the slavery, hard labour, and oppression Israel would endure at the hands of the Egyptians, as recorded in the book of Exodus. But this also includes the persecution that would start before that, recorded in Genesis 21 as Ishmael scoffed at Isaac (a detail that is also noted in Galatians chapter 4). As such, these 400 years don't only include the time Abram's descendants were in Egypt (for that was only 215 years), but they begin that moment Ishmael scoffed at Isaac. And before we move on, in case this is a point of confusion, I want to note that some places in the Bible (including Galatians) refer to this period as 430 years, as they include the 25 years prior to Isaac's birth, starting from the point Abram first came to the land of Canaan.

Now, this seems like bad news for Abram, right? You can understand the horror. However, God made clear that He would intervene. We read in verse 14:

Genesis 15:14

And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions.

That is, God would not allow the wicked to escape judgement — a prophecy fulfilled in the 10 plagues of Egypt recorded in Exodus. And furthermore, God would actually use this situation to bless Israel, and provide them with great wealth. A prophecy that would literally come to pass as Israel left Egypt, taking articles of silver, gold and clothing, plundering the Egyptians.

Next, God gives personal reassurance for Abram, saying:

Genesis 15:15

Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age.

So then, Abram would not see all this turmoil, and indeed would live to be 175 years of age.

And God next confirms there would be a future for his descendants:

Genesis 15:16

But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

Those generations are measured from Levi, to Kohath, to Amram, to Moses as recorded in 1 Chronicles 6. But why this length of time? Why was it necessary that Abram's descendants would need to go to Egypt? Well, 3 reasons (at least).

First, to spare them from the famine in Jacob's time, with his son, Joseph, being able to provide for his whole family due to the position God had put him in in Egypt.

Second, that the Hebrew nation might come out of Egypt strong enough, and numerous enough to fight the giant nations that lived throughout the land of Canaan.

But third, that God might show grace to Amorites, allowing them these years to turn from their wicked ways before He brought judgement on them through Israel. Sadly though, apart from one Canaanite woman, Rahab, they would not turn. And so indeed God did judge them. Time for them ran out, just as it did before the flood, when God was gracious to allow 120 years before the flood came. And just as time will run out for all in our day, for those who refuse to turn to Jesus as their Saviour, and instead persist in their sin.

So God had given Abram this vision of the future, and assurance that despite this troubled time Israel would face in Egypt, they would return to the land where Abram was right now. That is, God was saying in advance that these trials they would face as a nation were not to be interpreted as a sign that God's promise to Abram had failed. That was important for his *descendants* to know.

But you may recall Abram's question, was how would *he* know that he, and ultimately his descendants, would inherit the land. Well, we come back to this covenant, this contract if you like, that God was going to establish with Abram. But Abram, we know, was in a deep sleep. And we read in verse 17:

Genesis 15:17

And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces.

Whatever was happening here, wasn't Abram's doing, for he was in a deep sleep. So rather, it was God's doing. You see, as Finnis Dake notes in his commentary, *A flaming torch or a burning lamp was an emblem of God's presence*. And furthermore, *in the East it was a custom to light a torch when making a covenant or in celebration of a marriage, to symbolize the fire of destruction if the agreement was broken*.

So, what we have here is God Himself passing between these divided animals, Himself in the midst of this sacrifice, making a covenant with Abram that required only one party to adhere to — and that was Himself. And what marvellous grace this is — for if the covenant had been based on Abram's inclination, willingness or faithfulness to keep to laws or any ritual, then he would have blown it. How do I know? Because his great, great, great, great, great (and so on) grandparents, Adam and Eve, had just *one* thing that they were commanded *not* to do — and they did it!

And in doing *this*, God not only established a covenant with Abram based on His own character, rather than Abram's, but He also foreshadowed the grace that He would show to you and I — that *our* salvation would not depend on our inclination, willingness or faithfulness to keep to any law. Rather, *all* the work necessary for our salvation was completed by Jesus Himself on the cross in our place — establishing a newer and better covenant than that described here in Genesis 15.

Let me put this plainly — just as there was nothing Abram needed to do, or could do, to be sure of this promise that he would inherit the land, there is nothing that you need to do, or can do, to be sure of the promise of *your* salvation. If you have repented of your sins, and put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ as your Saviour, then nothing you can do, or not do, will prevent you from inheriting eternal life — for the ability to save rests *solely* on God. You cannot contribute to your salvation any more than Abram could contribute to the covenant God made with *him*.

Now, if you do not know Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour, you need to listen up. Just as Abram was in a deep sleep, and unable to do anything here, so you are — the Bible describes — dead in your sins. That is, you have no hope of standing as innocent before God on judgement day, and nothing you can do to earn your salvation. But thankfully, God Himself has done all that is necessary to secure your salvation, dependant not on you, but entirely on Him. All that remains is for you to approach Him in faith, taking Him at His Word, just as Abram did — and it will be accounted to you for righteousness. In other Words, God will not see you as guilty any more. He will look on you as if you were His own Son, all because He looked on His own Son as if He were you.

You would be foolish to turn down such wonderful grace. I beg you, don't leave this place today without talking to myself or one of the elders. And if you're listening online now, or on catch-up, then contact us or speak to a Christian you know with urgency. Urgency!

Now, God, having made this one-sided covenant with Abram that he might know that he would inherit the land, clarifies to Abram what the extent of that land would be:

Genesis 15:18-21

On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates—the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."

Another way of putting this; God promised Abram that his descendants would inherit a land reckoned to be around 300'000 square miles in size. A land that God gave *them*, and gave to no other. However, to date the most Israel has possessed was around 30'000 square miles at the time of King Solomon. So then, this promise is not yet entirely fulfilled, and we'll in fact find that this will finally come to pass during the Millennium when Jesus will reign on Earth.

Conclusion

There are a few things we really should take away from today. First, God Himself is our reward — and He is far greater than anything else we could chase after. Second, it is God alone who saves — it is not down to our works — and He has done all that is necessary for our salvation. And third, wonderfully, there are not conditions on our salvation that we might somehow lose it. Jesus is able to keep those the Father has placed into His hand.

Application questions

This week, I encourage you to think on these things:

- Are you seeking some *thing*. Or are you seeking God? For only He will satisfy.
- Are you trusting in Him alone to save you? For only He can do so.

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