

God's Covenant with Abraham

As we continue our study through Genesis, we come to one of the most important chapters in the Bible. Genesis 15 not only advances the story of Abraham, but it also lays the foundation for what Paul will later teach in Romans 4. Over the next several lessons we will move back and forth between these two chapters because the New Testament repeatedly points us back to what happened here.

Before we begin, it is helpful to review where we are in Abraham's life.

God called Abraham while he was living in Ur of the Chaldeans, and later in Haran. For years I pictured Abraham as a man who had always lived in a tent somewhere in the desert. In reality, both Ur and Haran were sophisticated, prosperous cities for their day. They were centers of commerce with extensive trade and considerable wealth. Abraham was accustomed to city life before God called him.

One day God simply appeared to him and told him to leave his country and go to a land that He would show him. God promised to make Abraham into a great nation, to bless him, to make his name great, and through him to bless all the families of the earth. He also promised to give the land to Abraham's descendants.

What is so remarkable is that Abraham believed Him. God appeared to a man who had grown up in an idolatrous culture and simply made these astonishing promises, and Abraham obeyed.

Later, after Abraham and Lot separated because their herds had become too large to remain together, God again expanded those promises. He told Abraham to look in every direction because all the land he could see would belong to him and to his descendants forever. He also promised that his descendants would become as numerous as the dust of the earth.

Most recently we looked at Melchizedek. That study took us into the book of Hebrews, where we learned why Melchizedek is so important.

Melchizedek blessed Abraham. Abraham, in turn, gave tithes to Melchizedek. Since Levi was still represented in Abraham, the writer of Hebrews concludes that Levi himself, in a sense, paid tithes through Abraham. The lesser paid tithes to the greater, and the greater blessed the lesser.

That becomes the basis for understanding Christ's priesthood. Jesus could never have served as a priest under the Law because He came from the tribe of Judah rather than the tribe of Levi. Instead, He is our High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, a priesthood that never ends because He ever lives to make intercession for us.

The writer of Hebrews even pauses to tell his readers that this subject is difficult. Instead of telling them to ignore it, however, he challenges ordinary believers to grow spiritually so they can understand it. Melchizedek is not an optional doctrine for scholars. It is an important part of understanding who Christ is, and it is meant for all of us to understand.

Yahweh Appears to Abraham Again

Genesis 15 opens by saying,

"After these things the word of Yahweh came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great.'"

You may notice that I read "Yahweh" instead of "Lord." I use a translation that does that because the Hebrew text actually contains God's covenant name.

When God appeared to Moses at the burning bush and sent him to Egypt, Moses asked whom he should say had sent him. God answered by revealing His covenant name and said that this was the name by which He wanted to be remembered.

Over time the Jewish people became so concerned about taking God's name in vain that they gradually stopped speaking it altogether. That became a tradition, but it is not what the Scriptures themselves teach.

Whether someone prefers the pronunciation "Jehovah" or "Yahweh" is not the important issue. Ancient Hebrew was originally written without vowels, so we cannot know with certainty exactly how the name was pronounced. Both pronunciations are attempts to represent the same Hebrew consonants. My purpose is simply to remind us that God revealed His personal covenant name.

Notice something else about these appearances of God. Every time God comes to Abraham, He tells Abraham what **He** is going to do.

"I will make you a great nation."

"I will bless you."

"I will give you this land."

"I will make your descendants like the dust of the earth."

Now He says,

"Do not fear... I am a shield to you. Your reward shall be very great."

Everything begins with God's initiative.

Abraham's Question

Abraham answers with a question that at first seems almost unrelated.

"O Lord Yahweh, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"

Why would God promise to be Abraham's shield and great reward, only to have Abraham immediately start talking about children? The answer becomes clear when we remember the promises God has already made. God has repeatedly told Abraham that he will become a great nation and that his descendants will inherit the land. Abraham is trying to put all those promises together. In effect he is saying, "Lord, You've promised all these wonderful things, but how can they happen? I still don't have a son." Perhaps, he thinks, Eliezer—the servant born in his household—is intended to become his heir.

God immediately answers that question.

"This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir."

Then God brings Abraham outside.

"Look toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them... So shall your descendants be."

On a clear winter night you can step outside and try to count the stars, but before long you lose track. Even today astronomers cannot tell us exactly how many stars there are.

That is the point. God is not inviting Abraham to perform a mathematical exercise. He is telling him that his descendants will simply be beyond counting, just as earlier they were compared to the dust of the earth.

Then we arrive at one of the great verses of Scripture.

"Then he believed Yahweh; and He counted it to him as righteousness."

What Does "Counted" Mean?

This verse is quoted repeatedly in the New Testament, especially in Romans 4. Before we leave Genesis, however, it is worth asking exactly what the word *counted* means.

Some translations use the word *reckoned*. Unfortunately, we sometimes hear that word used casually, as when someone says, "I reckon so." That is not the idea here at all. The Hebrew word is an accounting term. To see that, we can look at several passages in Leviticus where exactly the same word is used.

In Leviticus 25, during the instructions about the Year of Jubilee, land that had been sold could be redeemed before the Jubilee arrived. How would the price be determined? The years had to be counted. The value had to be calculated. The amount still owed had to be figured. It was bookkeeping.

The same thing appears later in the chapter when a man had sold himself into service because of poverty. Again the remaining years until Jubilee were calculated. The value of his redemption was determined by counting the years that remained.

In each case, the very same Hebrew word is used. Someone sits down and does the accounting. Someone writes the figures into the books.

That gives remarkable force to Genesis 15:6. Abraham believed God. God did the accounting. God entered something into His own books. Under Abraham's name, God wrote one word: **Righteous**.

As someone who taught mathematics for many years, I find that picture especially meaningful.

God made the calculation.

God entered the result.

God declared Abraham righteous.

At some point someone told each of us about Christ. Perhaps it was a parent, a pastor, a Sunday school teacher, or a friend. We believed God's promise concerning His Son.

What did God do? He entered the verdict into His books.

He wrote "Righteous."

That picture has become increasingly meaningful to me. God is not continually erasing and rewriting the page every time we fail. He does not keep saying, "Recalculating," the way an old GPS unit did whenever we missed a turn.

He has declared the believer righteous.

Elsewhere Scripture tells us that He remembers our sins no more and casts them behind His back. That declaration rests upon His own accounting, not ours.

After declaring Abraham righteous, God again reminds him,

"I am Yahweh who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it."

Abraham responds with another honest question.

"O Lord Yahweh, how may I know that I will possess it?"

This is encouraging. Abraham is a man of faith, yet he still asks, "How will I know?"

God does not rebuke him. Instead, He gives him one of the greatest demonstrations of His faithfulness found anywhere in Scripture.

The Covenant Ceremony

Instead of simply answering Abraham's question with words, God gives him an object lesson that Abraham would immediately understand.

He tells Abraham,

"Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, and a three-year-old female goat, and a three-year-old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon."

Don't just read that list and move on. Picture what is happening.

A three-year-old heifer is a full-grown animal. Add to that a three-year-old female goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. Abraham gathers all of these animals exactly as God instructed.

Then Scripture says,

"He brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds."

That is not the kind of scene we naturally picture when we read our Bibles.

Abraham cuts the heifer in half and lays the two pieces opposite one another. He does the same with the goat and the ram. The birds are left whole. Between the divided animals is an open pathway.

There is blood on the ground. There are animal carcasses lying on either side.

It is a vivid and solemn scene.

As I studied this passage a few years ago, I learned that this was not unique to Israel. Throughout the ancient Near East, this was a recognized way of making a covenant.

In fact, the Hebrew language itself reflects that practice.

Our English Bibles usually say that God "made" a covenant with Abraham. The Hebrew expression is literally that God **cut** a covenant.

That wording comes directly from ceremonies like this one.

When two people entered into a solemn agreement, they would divide animals and place the pieces opposite each other. Then both parties would walk together between the divided animals.

By doing so, they were saying something very serious.

In effect they were declaring, "If I fail to keep my word, may what happened to these animals happen to me." That was the seriousness of the covenant.

Today we sign contracts, have witnesses, and notarize documents. In Abraham's day, a covenant like this declared that each person's very life stood behind his promise.

That is the background for what God is about to do.

Waiting for God

After Abraham prepares everything, something unexpected happens.

"The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away."

You can almost picture him standing guard over the sacrifices, chasing away every scavenger that tries to land on them.

Then evening comes.

"As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him."

The atmosphere changes completely. This is no ordinary ceremony.

God is about to reveal not only what He will do for Abraham, but what will happen to Abraham's descendants for centuries to come.

God's Promise Extends into the Future

The Lord tells Abraham,

"Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years."

Immediately we recognize the reference to Israel's future bondage in Egypt.

What is remarkable is that none of this has happened yet. Abraham does not even have the promised son, yet God is already describing what will happen to descendants who do not yet exist.

God continues,

"But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions."

That, of course, points ahead to the Exodus.

Then God turns back to Abraham personally.

"As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age."

God is giving Abraham the broad outline of history.

Abraham himself will die peacefully.

His descendants will spend centuries in Egypt.

God will judge Egypt.

Then He will bring His people back to the land He has promised.

The Iniquity of the Amorites

God adds one statement that deserves careful thought.

"Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."

Who were the Amorites? Tracing the genealogy back through Genesis, they descended from Canaan, the son of Ham. They were among the peoples living in the land God had promised to Abraham's descendants.

Yet God says Israel will not take possession of the land immediately.

Why? Because "the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." That is an astonishing statement.

God could have destroyed those nations instantly. He has the authority to judge whenever He chooses. Instead, He delays judgment for four hundred years.

During those centuries their idolatry, immorality, and wickedness would continue to increase. God was not overlooking their sin. Rather, He was patiently allowing His purposes to unfold according to His own timetable.

This reminds us of God's long-suffering throughout Scripture.

The New Testament tells us that God is patient, "not wishing for any to perish." We see that same patience here. God gives the Amorites centuries before judgment falls.

That also brings our own nation to mind. Has the sin of the United States reached its full measure? I do not believe it has.

If not, then there is still time for repentance.

Think about Nineveh.

God sent Jonah to announce coming judgment, and Jonah was not happy when the people repented. Yet that is exactly what happened. From the king downward, the city humbled itself before God.

When you stop and picture that, it is remarkable.

It would be like walking into Washington, D.C., preaching God's warning, and seeing the president, Congress, government leaders, and the people across the country repent together. That is essentially what happened in Nineveh.

God gave them time.

Here He gives the Amorites four hundred years.

His patience is not weakness. It is mercy.

God Walks Alone

Finally, the moment of the covenant arrives.

"When the sun had set and it was very dark, behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces."

Most Bible interpreters understand these as visible representations of God's presence.

Notice what does **not** happen.

Abraham never walks through the pieces. Only God does.

That is the key to understanding the entire ceremony.

In a normal covenant, both parties would walk between the divided animals, each pledging to keep the agreement.

Here, God alone passes through.

Abraham had asked, "How may I know that I will possess it?"

God's answer is to bind Himself to His own promise.

In effect, God is saying, "This covenant depends on Me."

It is not a partnership in which both parties must guarantee the outcome.

It is a one-sided covenant established by God Himself.

By passing alone between the divided animals, God gives Abraham the strongest assurance possible that every promise He has made will certainly come to pass.

That is why Genesis concludes this section by saying,

"On that day Yahweh cut a covenant with Abram."

God did not merely make a promise.

He confirmed it by entering into a covenant whose fulfillment rested upon His own faithfulness and did not depend on Abram at all.