

In The Beginning...God: The Covenant with Abraham
06.12.2022

Barry did a great job last week of showing us how the Call of Abraham impacted his life, his location and his legacy. We had a glimpse into the incredible faith that Abraham lived out in his obedience to God. In fact, our passage today states that “Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness.” In Chapter 12 we see:

***“² I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.^[a]
³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”***

And this constitutes the Call of Abram/Abraham, and this statement is central to the Covenant of Abram/Abraham, which we will be looking at today.

We will be looking at Genesis chapter 15, and as always we have some Bibles under most of the seats here, and you are welcome to use those, even to take one home with you if you don't have a Bible of your own to read.

Let me say this as well: We are hopping over some chapters here, and there is some good reading between what we're covering. We're playing some Bible “The Floor Is Lava” as we focus on passages pertinent to this series. For instance, in Chapter 14 Abram goes all *Liam Neeson* on some bad men who threaten his nephew Lot! It's a good tale, but one we will bypass in order to arrive at Chapter 15. I do encourage you to go back and fill in with some reading of your own.

SLIDE:

Genesis 15:1

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.

I am your shield,^[a]
your very great reward.^[b]”

² But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit^[c] my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” ⁵ He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then He said to him, “So shall your offspring^[d] be.”

⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and He credited it to him as righteousness.

Now let me say this about Abram (soon to be Abraham): He is a Patriarch. He is a MEGA-MAN of Holiness. He is a Pillar of Faith. And yet... right now, he’s a guy faced with a God, and his God’s plan seems better than his own at the moment. Do Not Forget that the friendship between Abram and YHWH is still relatively new. He has not had a lot of opportunity at this point to see God operate. Talk to Abraham now, and you would see an entirely different person than you would have seen during this meeting with God! You’d see someone with experience, a faith strengthened by repeated successes in following God. But at this moment in his lifetime, this is what comes out of Abram’s mouth:

SLIDE ⁸ But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, how can I know?”

What a marvelous hope this gives to us! I feel like you could have taken all the possible things Abram could have said here, and this would make it to the bottom 3 good choices. Does this remind you of anything? It immediately sends my brain into the New Testament, landing in Mark 9. Jesus is ministering to the crowds, and up comes a man who says, “My son is possessed by a spirit that causes him to have convulsions. It has thrown him into fires, into water, to kill him... If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us!” ²³ “If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

²⁴ Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Wow. I don't know about you, but I identify with this. Hearing statements like this makes me think that maybe I have a chance to survive my own shortcomings! You might think I'm saying this only because it seems like good sermon fodder, but I'm telling you right now that if any of you think that just because someone is standing up here they have their ducks all in a row, has a walk with God closer than any you'll ever have... well, let me just say that God does not require Perfection in order to be in His service. You want to know how many days a week I wake up feeling like I'm not sufficient to serve God? Some weeks, it's the same number of days I wake up. But that has not diminished my belief in God's plan, in God's control, in God's purpose! It's just sometimes I feel like God's plan is so big that He might not notice me. But even when I struggle with doubt, this gives me confidence to say dumb things like "Sovereign Lord, how can I know?" Which, turns out, really isn't too bad, considering how positively God answered that sentiment both times we see it.

And this moment with Abram shows this magnificent humanity/mundanity that shows us that Abram, too, is just a man. And Barry brought this up in his message last week... Abram isn't light years ahead of us. Rather, he's a regular person near the start of what will be a long journey of Obedience. THAT is what makes you a MEGA-MAN/WOMAN of Holiness!

"How can I know?" Now this is where things get weird...

SLIDE: Genesis 15:9-11

⁹ So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon."

¹⁰ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. ¹¹ Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

I've got an image to share with you, with a quick semi-interesting story of how I came by it. My son Caleb is a youth minister in Campbellsville, Kentucky. We were visiting him last Christmas when friends of his, Jon & Emily, a young married couple, dropped by for a visit. The young lady says, "I understand you live in Columbia. I'm from Columbia!" Columbia TN?! "Yes!" I said we live on the North end of town; do you know where Jumbo House is? "I love Jumbo House!"

So, there it was: we were **Jumbo House Hamburger Eaters-in-law!** Her father is the preacher at West 7th Street Church of Christ in Columbia, and has been for quite a few years. Her SISTER, Marcy Yoder, is an artist/teacher living in Knoxville, and it just so happens that Marcy painted a picture of this very Covenant set-up.

So, I bring this image to you via Columbia TN, via Campbellsville KY, back to Columbia, and on to Knoxville, by way of Etsy:

SLIDE: Covenant Watercolor of divided animals (pic) I love having something I can touch or see to help me with God's Word. BTW, I think there's one print left on Etsy ;)

SLIDE: Genesis 15:12-21

¹² As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. ¹³ Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that 400 years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

¹⁷ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi[Ⓜ] of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates— ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, ²⁰ Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, ²¹ Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."

SLIDE: Return to Watercolor Painting of Covenant Scene

God basically tells Abram, “You want to know HOW you can know?? How about I give you more details than you would have asked for.

400 years in someone else’s country!

Enslaved & Mistreated

Your people will come out loaded with wealth!

You personally will die at a good old age!

400 years from now your people will come back this way to take this land.

And then God says, “Abram, you ask ‘How can I know?’; Let me do this in a framework you fully understand—**The Covenant!**

This practice of making a covenant is at first misleading. This is NOT an offering, not a “sacrifice” (though if you’re the heifer...). It was a relatively common thing in the cultures of that area to hold a Covenant Ceremony like this, common to the degree that Abram knew what was up when God told him to *“Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.”* We know this because, without any further instruction from God, he set everything up.

And here’s how the Covenant ceremony works... You arrange these representative animals with a pathway between them. Then the parties of the Covenant walk through.

In this instance it seems likely that God here takes a form much like a junior version of His “shekinah” glory, the smoky, fiery, blazing nature that screams “GOD JUST GOT REAL!” You may remember the account in Exodus where Israel escapes from Egypt accompanied by a column of smoke and fire. This same “pillar” continued to guide them. The same term is used when God displays on top of Mt. Sinai. And here He is seen as what is possibly a similar form, some sort of cross between an oven and a torch. He passes between the butchered animals, and in doing so is saying, “If for any reason I fail to fulfill my part of this Covenant, may it be done to me just as it has been to these creatures: that I would be cut off, cut up, dismembered, foul, rank, dead!” But the amazing, singular thing here is that **Abram** does not walk through this death to make his side of the promise.

God walks through alone, offering His Omnipotence, His Perfection, His Timelessness, His Supremacy as guarantor, collateral. God just co-signed for someone that He KNOWS cannot hold up their end of the agreement. Yet, He walks the Covenant into existence anyway, because His people must have a chance, and without Him they have none.

By this action God gives His promise to the people through Abraham: ***Your people will be countless as the stars in the sky, and My blessing will come to the whole world through you.*** And by connecting Abraham and his descendants to Himself through this Covenant, they continue to have access to Him, to become the People of His Promise, to be the People of His Word, to learn to live morally, justly, correctly... and perhaps most of all, to recognize that there is a Supreme God who cares for His people with lovingkindness, in spite of their imperfections.

So, you might be wondering, now that I've gone through all this ancient stuff, how this has any bearing whatsoever on YOU. Well... good point. And the truth of it is... it DOESN'T. You're not Hebrews, you're not Jews. This was a covenant between God and Abraham, between YHWH and Israel. It has nothing to do with you at all. You're a people of the New Testament! It is dusty, crumbly history from another culture from another time on another continent! It's a pointless pursuit, and a miserable waste of time.

(Pick up a note card from the podium and examine it)

Unless...

Read **Galatians 3:** ²⁶ **So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,** ²⁷ **for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.** ²⁸ **There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus...**

SLIDE: ²⁹ **...If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.**

Guess what, gang... you're in God's Will!!

Here's something you should never forget about God: He has Excellent Vision!

God is unmatched when it comes to playing the Long Game! Abram says, "I'm just a childless old guy living out of my luggage, who doesn't have an acre to his name!" And God says, "Ahh, just work with Me." Dreamcoat Joseph says, "I'm the baby of the family, and everyone but my own dad hates me. My brothers just sold me to slave traders!" And God says, "Ahh, just work with Me." Moses says, "I'm a washed-up foster Egyptian, rejected by his people, who has a hard time stringing enough words together to carry on a conversation!" And God says, "Ahh, just work with Me." David says, "I'm the bottom of my family's totem pole, the only thing I'm qualified to do is sing shepherd songs and watch the sheep!" And God says, "Ahh, just work with Me."

And everyone since the day Abram watched God walk out a Covenant agreement says, "I am just me, and I am weak, and imperfect, and I make huge mistakes, and I'm sometimes mean, greedy, selfish, thoughtless, depressed, mocking, angry, and other things that I can't bear to say. I don't have a chance of keeping up my end of this deal!"

And God says, "I didn't make the Covenant to see you end up like the heifer, the goat, the ram. For the time being, animals will be sacrificed in your place, so that you will never forget the price of Sin, nor the Promise I have made. The time is coming when all of that will be painfully clear. But for now, just work with me!"

In a beautiful transition to the New Testament, Hebrews 6 says this:

SLIDE: Hebrews 6:13-19-- *When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants." And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.*

*People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make **the unchanging nature of his purpose** very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set*

before us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

Jesus fulfills... *completes* the Abrahamic Covenant, which required, since God walked it for both parties, God Himself to be cut off, killed, destroyed as were the animals at the center of that covenantal oath... because Abraham and his descendants did not uphold their end of the contract.

And so, Christ completes the Old Covenant by “becoming” as the lifeless creatures that served as the threat of penalty. Jesus, in death, answers the penalty for the failure of the Covenant.

Yet He is not finished! Jesus then essentially brings Life out of Death by His own Mastery over it! He goes on to REMOVE DEATH from the equation altogether! And to anyone who chooses to participate in his New Covenant, His death & resurrection give Him the authority to offer enough (read: UNLIMITED) Grace that every participant will be made sufficient to the Promise. And so God and Man, once at Disparity with one another, are now fully reconciled.

How can He do so?

Because Jesus is God, yet Man. Though Joseph was not biologically the father of Jesus, meaning his ancestral line back to Abraham would not be valid by this route, Jesus’ mother Mary was also a direct descendant who could trace her lineage back to Abraham, and so Jesus represented Mankind’s side of the Covenant.

Because Jesus is Man, yet God.

SLIDE: Philippians 2:6-8—

Who, being in very nature^[a] God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature^[b] of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

So, the question for us is—How do WE walk the New Covenant that Jesus Christ has established? How do we walk through, not the death of animals, but the death of God's own Son, the perfect, complete Sacrifice?

SLIDE: "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ..."

...If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and *heirs according to the promise.*"