The Patriarchs from the book of Genesis Part 6 – August 6, 2023

With input from https://biblehub.com/commentaries/genesis/1-15; https://www.studylight.org/commentary/genesis/15-16.html

In this lesson we will compare our reactions to trusting God as we study Abram’s reactions to God.

**Genesis 15:1-16**

*After these things (*Abram rescued Lot and pursued the 5 kings to Damascus*) the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying,*

*“Do not fear, Abram,*

*I am a shield to you;*

*Your reward shall be very great.”*

How would you respond if God himself told you this?

We do see this in **Matthew 6:3-4:**

*But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

**Matthew 6:26:** *Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*

**Matthew 6:31-33:** *Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*

**2 Thessalonians 3:3:** *But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.*

**Genesis 15:2:** *But Abram said, “Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”*

Is Abram a little myopic here? He was just victorious over 5 kings in battle with 318 men yet he’s worried that he hast to do something to make God’s promise happen. God had just proved what he said *“I am a shield to you.”*

Up to this point in Abram's relationship with God, we have seen him silently receive the promise that his descendants would become a great nation. Now, after receiving another assurance, Abram speaks back to God. His current heir is a servant, not a son. He boldly—but respectfully—says to the Lord, "What will you give me?" There are two possibilities here:

1. Though it sounds like a complaint, Abram's question is built on his faith in God's power and promises. Abram believes God, but he cannot yet see a path to the things God has promised. Instead of ceasing to believe, Abram takes the opportunity to ask his hard question to the source of his hope.

Sometimes asking a hard question in prayer is the most faithful step a believer can take. Acknowledging our own limitations to God, while asking for His wisdom, is a much better approach than suffering in silence or ignorance. At times, admitting that we cannot understand God's plan is part of submitting ourselves to it. As we'll see through Abram's example, God is always fully faithful to keep His Word.

1. Abram is complaining and God is longsuffering and patient with Abram. This would be based on the first word of verse 6 – **then** *“****Then*** *he believed in the Lord; and He credited it to him as righteousness.”* But before this statement where Abram believed, God repeats and restates the blessing and promise to Abram.

We see a glimpse of levels of belief in **Mark 9:17-29:** *And one person from the crowd answered Him, “Teacher, I brought You my son, because he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; 18 and [l]whenever it seizes him, it slams him to the ground, and he foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth and becomes stiff. And I told Your disciples so that they would cast it out, but they could not do it.”*

*19 And He answered them and said, “O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!” 20 And they brought the boy to Him. When he saw Him, the spirit immediately threw him into convulsions, and falling to the ground, he began rolling around and foaming at the mouth. 21 And He asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. 22 It has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to kill him. But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!”*

*23 But Jesus said to him, “‘****If You can?****’ All things are possible for the one who believes.” 24 Immediately the boy’s father cried out and said,* ***“I do believe; help my unbelief!”*** *25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again!”*

This is likely where Abram is now, believing God, but still needing to trust Him more. “Jesus, Jesus, how I trust him, oh for grace to trust him more.”

*3 Abram also said, “Since You have given me no son, one who has been born in my house is my heir.”*

God has given him no children. If Abram died at that very moment, all that he owned would be passed on to one of his servants. Being well over seventy-five years old, this is not an unreasonable fear on Abram's part. Which is a likely reason God’s calms those fears by telling him in verse 15 that he will be buried at “a good old age.”

Even in this, Abram manages to express faith in God. Those who ask hard questions of God are, in fact, acting in faith. Abram had not ceased to believe. If so, why speak to God, at all? He is not accusing God or rejecting God. Instead, Abram is taking his questions to the source of his hope and waiting, in faith, for God's answer. That response will come in the following verses.

*4 Then behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.” 5 And He took (brought* ESV*) him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”* Notice God didn’t tell Abram to go outside, there’s a sense that God was more physically involved in moving him, guiding him by the hand?

 *6 Then he believed in the Lord; and He credited it to him as righteousness.*

This is the verse Paul references in Romans and Galatians 3.

James also references Abraham’s faith in chapter 2: *Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. 19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.*

*20 You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21 Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,”and he was called God’s friend. 24 You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.*

**Genesis 15:7-11:** *And He said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it.” 8 But he said, “Lord God, how may I know that I will possess it?”*

*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.” 10 Then 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.*

*11 And birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.*

Why is verse 11 included in this text?

Each of the five animals chosen for the ritual were "clean" animals that would be appropriate, especially under the Law, to use as a sacrifice before God. But before the ritual is ended, a group of unclean birds of prey descend upon the remains of the animals. Abram is forced to drive them away. This could be an omen of the coming 400-year affliction of Abram's descendants described by the Lord's prophecy in the following verses.

It also can show that Abraham is still actively involved throughout this process as we need to always be actively involved as we serve the Lord.

Remember that this sacrifice is unique that it is God making the covenant with Abram without the normal requirement of both parties making a commitment. God is truly showing his faithfulness he has committed to Abram.

*12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. 13 Then God said to Abram, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years.*

At this point in the story, the sun is going down. Previously, God had instructed Abram to look at the stars (Genesis 15:5). That moment either took place within Abram's vision or on the previous night. On this night, at dusk, Abram seems supernaturally overpowered by a deep sleep and a great and dreadful darkness.

In the following verses, the Lord will speak to Abram in a dream or vision as he sleeps or after Abram is awakened. The upcoming words will prophesy the slavery of Abram's descendants in Egypt, their eventual exodus, and their conquest of the sinful nations of Canaan.

*14 But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. 15 As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. 16 Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the wrongdoing of the Amorite is not yet complete.”*

God's given reason for that delay is that the sin—the "iniquity"—of the Amorite people had not yet reached its full measure, or was not yet complete. In other words, one purpose of Abram's future family, the nation of Israel, is to serve as an instrument of judgment on the Amorite people for their sins against God.

However, God would not preemptively judge the Amorites or any other people group of Canaan. In His justice, He would wait for them to earn the judgment He would pour out on them through His people Israel when they came to claim the land of Canaan as their own. This delay also serves as an expression of God's mercy, allowing that much more time for the wicked inhabitants of Canaan to see their sin and repent.

We serve a gracious and patient God!

The reason God established the descendants of Abram as the nation Israel was chiefly to use Israel to produce Jesus the Savior. God’s promise of worldwide blessing through Abram was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, through whom people of all nations may receive God’s salvation. Jesus Christ was, in a special sense, the promised descendant of Abram (see 12:2-3). When believers become Christ’s people, they become, through him, Abram’s descendants also, and so share in the blessings promised to Abram. The permanent rest God gives them is more than a dwelling place in Canaan; it is salvation through Jesus Christ (Hebrews 4:6-10).

**Genesis 15:17-20:** *Now it came about, when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, a smoking oven and a flaming torch appeared which passed between these pieces.*

After God completes His prophecy about Abram's descendants, He returns to the covenant ritual that began with Abram dividing and arranging the halves of the animals God had instructed him to bring (Genesis 15:9). Now the sun goes down, and God completes the ritual. Whether Abram is now awake and sees it with his own physical eyes, or sees this event in his vision or dream, we don't know for sure. Either way, what Abram sees is remarkable. In the dark, two items move between the halves of the animals. One is a smoking fire pot, something that served as an oven in Abram's day. The other is a flaming torch.

In the narrative itself, we're not told what these two items represent. However, fire is often associated with both God's judgment and His holiness. In addition, these elements of smoke, fire, and the various kinds of animals later used for sacrifice under the Law point to God's future relationship with Israel.

Finally, in moving between the two halves of the animals, God is apparently finalizing the agreement between Himself and His people through Abram. This aspect, in particular, is important for its symbolism. Scholars suggest that this ritual—passing between the halves of sacrificed animals—was meant to imply a binding oath on those who participated. By walking between the animals, the person was accepting that same destruction if they broke their end of the bargain. Pointedly, note that Abram does not pass between the halves—only God does, via the symbolism of the pot and flame. The promise God has made here is entirely dependent on His will and His work.

Abram had begun this part of the conversation by asking the Lord how he would know if God would keep His promise to give Abram and his descendants the land of Canaan. Abram's dramatic experience of God's answer in performing this covenant ritual would surely have made a lifelong impression on him.

 *18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying,*

*“To your descendants I have given this land,*

*From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:*

God gets very specific about the boundaries of the land He is promising to Abram and his descendants.

Covenants between God and humans are significant, of course. Often they include conditions from God which, if met by the people involved, will result in God keeping His end of the agreement. This covenant is different. Sometimes referred to as the Abrahamic Covenant, this was an agreement in which all the conditions and promises were on God's side. For example, in the prior passage, God symbolically passes between the severed halves of the animals. This might have been a common ritual of that era, where both parties declared their obligations by walking through the middle of the carcasses. Notably, only God is shown to do this in the preceding verses—Abram's work is not part of this promise.

God was binding Himself to do as He promised no matter what Abram or Abram's descendants did or did not do. Put another way, this promise from God to the people of Israel to give them this land, was a unilateral covenant.

In defining this Promised Land, God begins at the southern border with the "river of Egypt," which many scholars identify as the Wadi el-Arish River, not the Nile. The northern border would be the great Euphrates River. The following verses will define the remaining areas of the land promised to Abram's offspring in terms of the people groups occupying those lands previously.

*19 the land of the Kenite, the Kenizzite, the Kadmonite, 20 the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Rephaim, 21 the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Girgashite, and the Jebusite.”*

Now the Lord continues to define the areas of the nation His people will possess in terms of the people groups occupying those lands previously. This verse lists the Hittites and Perizzites, both well-known occupiers of the land of Canaan, as well as the Rephaim, one of the people groups defeated by the four kings of the east in the previous chapter (Genesis 14:5).

