

Genesis 15 The Nature of True Faith

Introduction

'Don't forget': to do your homework, clean your teeth, take your house key, to pick up certain groceries on the way home from work; to call someone back...the list is endless. We all have our memory aids from hi-tech gadgets to diaries or even a note on the back of your hand is the preferred choice of some people. Life is a rush for most people with an endless series of lists that fill up from the bottom, no sooner than you appeared to have covered everything further up the record of tasks requiring attention. As a Christian sometimes we need the Lord to prompt us about things we need to address in our lives, which we either were unaware of or had forgotten to do something about. On other occasions we are very familiar with promises or reassurances that the Lord has given us and, years later, what the Lord has laid on our hearts has yet to take place. We ask the question, 'why?'; sometimes there is a simple explanation, but many times there is no known reason; most of us have those times when we struggle to come to terms with life's circumstances with which we are presented. Abram and Sarai had come to one of those times. In our last study in Genesis, the glorious victory over the group of kings that included at least one from as far away as Iraq, recorded in Genesis 14, the culmination of the victory was the celebration service led by Melchizedek. After living in the Promised Land for a number of years and not seeing how things could work out in line with God's promises, at last there was a major step forward and a great encouragement and vindication of Abram for living God's way.

Yet further years passed by and nothing seemed to be happening. *After this...* chapter fifteen will begin. The specific length of time is not the important point here. Instead it is the sense of not knowing when their prayers would be answered. In their case the issue was one of childlessness when God had promised them an heir who would inherit the land. For you or me the issue may be very different. It may be something so personal that no-one else in the fellowship has a clue what it may be. For others of us there may be a few close family members or friends that are aware of something that we are struggling with, yet over the course of our lives all of us have issues at one time or another that cause us to wonder why God has allowed these things to take place, or why other things have never happened when we expected them and they seemed to be consistent with God's guidance for our lives. We have no idea how many years of apparent silence Abram and Sarai endured between the end of Genesis 14 and the revelatory encounter of Abram with God in Genesis 15. What is important is that when we too have our years of heartache and wondering why, we do not give up hope trusting that God has a plan and a purpose in allowing our pathway in life to unfold this way.

1. The Divine Reassurance (Genesis 15:1-5)

(a) **God's Promise** (15:1) *After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.* You can be certain that when in the Bible God encourages someone by saying *Don't be afraid* or *Fear Not* that the recipient of those words is experiencing that emotion. These words are found in both the Old and New Testament. Each of us will have in our minds examples of Bible stories where these words are uttered. In Luke 1:11-13 the angel Gabriel was sent by the Lord to His servant in the Temple in Jerusalem, who may even have been praying at that very moment about this issue on his heart. Luke given this account of the meeting of the angel with Zechariah: ¹¹ *Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.* ¹² *When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.* ¹³ *But the angel said to him: Do not be*

afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. Years had gone by since that prayer had first been uttered by this devout couple yet for reasons unknown the Lord allowed them to pass through this time of trial prior to their request being heard. John the apostle on the island of Patmos, a slave in the Roman slate quarries, knowing that he was likely to remain in that place for the rest of his earthly life, yet he experienced the presence of the glorified Lord Jesus Christ. Revelation 1:17 states: *When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead. Then He placed His right hand on me and said: Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.* The reassurance of the Lord we all need to sustain and strengthen us to get through our lives.

Why might Abram and Sarai have needed it at this particular time? The previous chapter has reported an extraordinary victory over a confederation of kings and their armies. There would be no doubt that Abram and his allies had a much smaller number of men at their disposal. A series of surprise night-time attacks which they had mounted had been successful. The enemy they had faced was totally taken by surprise. They had planned thoroughly to defeat the forces of the city states in that region and had convincingly destroyed both their armed forces and their walled towns and villages. Was it likely that they had gone home and thought –tough luck Abram and his friends are the winners we are not going back there again? Is it not more likely that the next year or a future year that they would return to attack the isolated shepherds and herdsmen of Abram and his friends? Feelings of extreme vulnerability would have been no surprise. Maybe it had even begun to affect Abram’s ability to sleep? This has been, I suspect, a problem from time to time for most of us and for some of us over a more extended period of time due to particular pressing circumstances. In his time of vulnerability these words of reassurance come to Abram: *Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward* (Genesis 15:1). Maybe this is the word you need to hear from the Lord today with something you are experiencing?

Whom do you trust? (1) The Lord can protect His people from other human beings who wish them harm. David rejoiced in God’s protection from his enemies. II Samuel 22:2-4: *He said: The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;³ my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. He is my stronghold, my refuge and my saviour— from violent men you save me. ⁴ I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies.* (2) God also protects His people from the attacks of the evil one. The problem is stated in I Peter 5:8-9a: *Be self- controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.⁹ Resist him, standing firm in the faith...* The solution is given in James 4:7: *Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.* (3) God also protects us against the influence of temptation I Corinthians 10:13: *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.* (4) God can also shield us from bitterness. Paul in prison in Rome was well aware that some Christians in that city were rejoicing in his exclusion from his regular ministry, because they wanted to get the credit ahead of him for leading people to Christ. I struggle to understand this kind of mindset, though I have come across it a few times over the years. Yet there have been some churches who think they have been doing God’s work by trying to put another evangelical cause out of God’s business; some Christian leaders who wanted to promote their ministries with a view of weakening or undermining a brother or sister in Christ. In Philippians 1 the great apostle uttered these courageous words: *Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.¹⁴ Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.¹⁶ The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel.¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing*

that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice... (Phil.1:12-18); only someone empowered by the Spirit of God could be so gracious in these kind of circumstances. However, many of us will also have different but similar experiences with which we struggle –may God’s grace enable us to overcome such trials.

(b) **Abram’s Question** (15:2-3) *But Abram said, O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit 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.* Lord thank you for the promise. I appreciate your protection. However, my underlying problem is still to be addressed. I have no heir. One of my servants currently stands to inherit all I possess. This is not consistent with the calling You gave me to leave my country, my extended family and come to Canaan. God -why is this circumstance happening or not as the case may be? All of us from the bottom of our hearts will cry out to God at different times in our lives, if not for ourselves then for other people in our families or circle of friends. We know life is very tough at times; but some things emotionally ‘hit us in the face’ as being particularly unfair. God, In Genesis 13:15-16, God had made this promise to Abram: *All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring for ever.*¹⁶ *I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.* Abram was hardly a spring chicken when he and Sarai had left Haran. He was seventy-five years old. Ten years later they would try and help the Lord out by having a child by Hagar the servant-girl, born when Abram was eighty-six (Gen.16:16). A further thirteen years later, aged ninety-nine (Gen.17:1), the longed-for child was finally acknowledged growing in Sarai’s womb. Allowing for the fact that they lived up to twice our average ages at that time, this is like a young couple having an early marriage but waiting until their forties to conceive a child naturally. You and I will have our questions. Maybe even a growing list of questions, but as with Job, in the book of that name, God normally does not give an explanation for the apparent delay in answering their prayers to the individual concerned. It must be stressed that it is quite legitimate and normal as a Christian to have things over which we have serious struggles. We are not being ‘unspiritual’ in acknowledging it. Many of the greatest Christian men and women down the centuries had their ‘dark valley’ experiences and we are not exempt from facing our difficulties as well. Honesty with the Lord especially and where appropriate with another Christian with whom we can pray about our trials is most appropriate. Never think it’s just me that has these problems. On the contrary, if you have never had an issue over which you have seriously struggled then praise the Lord, but remember you are an exceptional Christian if that is your experience.

(c) **God’s Guarantee** (15:4-5) *Then the word of the Lord came to him: This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.*⁵ *He took him outside and said, Look up at the heavens and count the stars— if indeed you can count them. Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be.* First of all (i) God repeated His earlier promise God is so gracious to Abram and is equally so to you and me as well. How many times do we need assurance? Some of us only need to hear something once and it sticks for life, no matter how long the timescale for fulfilment. Others of us, I suspect the majority, need reassurance from the Lord that we haven’t missed the moment or misunderstood the promise or that for some other reason we have missed out on the promised blessing. (ii) God explained His earlier promise Abram is trying very hard to see how the promise can be fulfilled under his existing circumstances. Could it be through my servant that we inherit the land? I don’t want to think that God has made a mistake here. All credit for Abram for not blaming the Lord. How many of us have to hold our hands up and admit that we have at least insinuated that the Lord might have made a mistake of one kind or another with the way things have turned out in our lives.

Abram it is through a son, your biological son, not an adopted son that the promise will be fulfilled. Although God doesn't spell it out specifically here there is an implied suggestion that it will be through his wife Sarai as well. Yet the Lord has dealt with the specific problem with which Abram was struggling and although it didn't take away the underlying problem it did make it easier to bear. Then using the sky as a visual aid He asked the patriarch to start counting the stars. In an age of no light pollution he had no excuse for not getting started! However, this was not a mathematical statement but an assurance that the day would come when his descendants would be too many to count and instead of a family, even an extended family, they would become a nation of people! Sometimes God lays things on our hearts maybe about your work and career; on other occasions about your family or concerning our church family. Nearly all the time we only ever have part of the picture and so must constantly walk by faith and not by sight. We must acknowledge this honestly as Christians; other people who don't share our faith, or any other faith, sometimes delude themselves into thinking that they don't do anything by trust or faith, yet every relationship and much more besides in life is only workable on a degree of trust, however, reasonable and certain we think it might be. You are loved by God as a Christian, if you have put your faith and trust in the Lord; His promises are reliable and although we may not see their fulfilment for many years, let us not doubt that He is faithful and will honour us for trusting Him. Jeremiah, in the depths of despair and in the ruins of Jerusalem, through his tears, could declare: *Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail.*²³ *They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.*²⁴ *I say to myself, The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for Him.*²⁵ *The Lord is good to those whose hope is in Him, to the one who seeks Him* (Lamentations 3:22-25). If necessary, even through our tears, let us renew our trust in the Lord.

2. **The Divine Declaration** (Genesis 15:6)

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

(a) **What is Justification?** This is a fundamental doctrine in both the Old and New Testament. At its heart is the issue of how a sinful person can be right with God and in fellowship with their Creator and Redeemer who is totally holy and perfect? The root issue is explained by Paul in Romans chapters one to three in which he explains that all human beings (Jesus excepted) are in this together. He concluded in Romans 3:23: *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* Hebrews chapter eleven reminds us that it was not only New Testament believers that live by faith, our Old Testament counterparts also lived this way. In essence it is acknowledging that we can do nothing to earn God's favour; we must simply receive the gift of grace God offers to us and live in the light of His promises to His children. Some people struggle with it because it seems too simple. However, when we grasp what the Bible is teaching on this topic it can bring joy to our hearts and peace to our minds. David in Psalm 32:1-2 expressed it this way when he grasped and experienced the joy of having his sins forgiven by God. *Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.*² *Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.* It is a legal term by which the guilty person is genuinely declared not guilty through the actions of another person. Paul comments on Genesis 15:6 in Romans chapter four, a most wonderful passage of God's Word. Romans 4:5, with reference to obtaining our salvation, states: *However, to the man who does not work [striving to be good enough to be accepted by God for salvation] but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.* On the basis of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross alone we are saved. That message had still to be communicated to Abram, but in Genesis chapter twenty-two God will reveal the essence of what Jesus would do in our place on the very spot where the Temple would later be built; on ground that would later be at the heart of the city of Jerusalem where Jesus would lay down

His life for us. Abram had a revelation of God in which he grasped to a degree beyond his earlier experience of God the need to place his faith wholly in the Lord. If you are a Christian then there will be a small number of key moments in your relationship with the Lord when you will renew afresh your trust in Him for your future. Is this one of those times when such a step needs to be taken?

(b) **What did Abram believe?** God's promise to him about an heir, despite his old age. This was a moment of complete surrender to God. Lord you know this thing you have promised appears to be beyond the realms of human possibilities –in fact it is miracle territory. But there is no-one else in the universe who is able to work miracles, so I'm not going crazy, instead like a little child trusting a parent, I'm going to say Lord I don't know how you are going to bring this about, but I accept that in Your way and Your timescale You will bring it to pass. Forsaking all I trust Him. We all have those crossroads situations where a step of faith is required to go forward on our faith journey. It is at the heart of the Gospel, as Jesus explained in John chapter three to the Jewish religious teacher Nicodemus. John 3:14-16 declares: *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,* ¹⁵ *that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.* ¹⁶ *For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.* In context the reference in John 3:14 is to Numbers 21:8-9 where God wanted, through Moses, to persuade the Israelite people to trust Him fully not only concerning their past, but in their present experience and for all that lay ahead of them into the future. God wants us to do exactly the same thing and like Moses to commit our uncertain futures into the hands of almighty God who is mighty to save. Some times we need to admit that believing children are better at this than adults. But however we get there, lets wholeheartedly commit our future into His hands.

3. **The Divine Reminder** (Genesis 15:7-21)

(a) **God's Promise** (15:7) *He also said to him, I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.* The parallel promise to the Israelite readers and hearers of this passage in the Wilderness is Exodus 20:1-3, words spoken at the giving of the ten commandments: *And God spoke all these words: ²I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ³You shall have no other gods before Me.* Some promises, it will be your children or grandchildren who will benefit from their fulfilment, but don't think I will forget to deliver what I have promised. Sometimes we too need reassurance. For Noah and his family after the flood, the rainbow (Genesis 9:12-17) was the sign that it would never happen again.

(b) **Abram's Question** (15:8) *But Abram said, O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it?* God help me see in practice that You will bring this promise to fulfilment. Please give me some kind of sign that I can know I'm not making the whole thing up or dreaming! Does God have a go at His servant for such a question? No! His patience is so encouraging because we too raise similar questions to the Lord at times and He will show such kindness to us as well. Looking back on this encounter with God, the writer of Hebrews 11:11-12 states: *By faith Abraham, even though he was past age— and Sarah herself was barren— was enabled to become a father because he considered Him faithful who had made the promise.¹² And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.* Will you and I receive the blessings God has in store for us because we are placing our trust in Him? No-one else can believe for you. We can do so much to support each other in other ways, but in this matter it is between each individual and the Lord.

(c) **God's Covenant** (15:9-11, 17-21) *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... ¹⁷ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier 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 river 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. Covenant ceremonies in the Ancient Near East involved slaughtered animals and altars. Participants walked between the sacrificial animals on the altar and in effect say may this happen to me if I break this promise. It is the ancient equivalent of the oath we say in court prior to giving personal testimony. It was practiced for many centuries in Israel certainly at least to the time of Jeremiah (Jer.34:18-20). Here only God passed between the sacrificed animals with His presence signified by the *smoking brazier with a blazing torch* (15:17). This object was a rudimentary furnace for purifying metals. It reminds us of the words of Peter in I Peter 1:6-9: *In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.⁷ These have come so that your faith— of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire— may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.⁸ Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,⁹ for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* For Abram and for later generations of believers the journey of faith would have some difficult stages, but the good news is that God never forgets the end-goal and purpose for your life and mine. He always succeeds in getting His people home at the end of their faith journey. Never forget that glorious truth!

(d) **God's Timetable** (15:12-16) *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 your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated four hundred years.¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions.¹⁵ You, however, will go to your fathers 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.* Hebrews 6:13-15 comments on these verses: *When God made His promise to Abraham, since there was no-one greater for Him to swear by, He swore by Himself,¹⁴ saying, I will surely bless you and give you many descendants. ¹⁵ And so **after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.*** The lesson for the Israelites in the wilderness was this: don't be impatient God will get you to the Promised Land. The same revelation in principle is true for all of us. May God help us to trust His promises and live in the light of that both personally and collectively, for Jesus' sake, Amen.