

Genesis 15:7-21 **A Sermon**

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We are continuing this morning in our study of the Life of Abram, picking up at verse 7 of chapter 15 and working through to the end of that chapter. At this point in the whole Abram story, we see that he has already packed up and left a familiar homeland, as well as his family of origin, in order to follow God's call. He has traveled a great distance, to a land that was far away, only to discover when he arrived that the land was inhabited by a number of different peoples - some of them warring nations. To make matters worse, he found himself in the middle of a severe drought and famine not long after he arrived, forcing him to have to go searching for food in potentially dangerous circumstances. And he faced other troubles as well.

Yet, in the face of these things, and in spite of instances of doubt and wavering faith, Abram experienced, first-hand, God's great provision for him - in a number of different ways. As he traveled he was protected. As he faced possible starvation he ended up with plenty of food and other material possessions as well. When he made a foolish mistake and his wife was taken away, God graciously delivered his wife back to him. As he experienced relational difficulties with Lot and his clan those things were all amicably worked out. And as he battled with the collected armies of a number of pagan kings he was granted success against overwhelming odds.

In all of these things Abram has seen, with his own eyes, a sort of *preview* of what God has promised to do and a demonstration of God's clear ability to actually do it. And so, on the heels of all that, and in the providence of God, the time has now come to *formally confirm and define* this covenant relationship that existed between Abram and his God.

To be sure, ever since the beginning of chapter 12 we have known about the existence of this relationship, which God initiated. So, in one sense, nothing new is happening in Chapter 15. And yet, in another sense, we ARE seeing something new because we are seeing God, by means of this ceremony, demonstrate something about the *depth* of His commitment to this relationship and to these promises he has made AND we are seeing it demonstrated in a formal, ceremonial sort of way.

But why? Why is it necessary for this ceremony to take place? What, really, is the big deal about these goings on with Abram? Well, there are a number of responses to that question, some of which we will look at in the main body of this sermon in a moment, but here at the beginning let me just focus on one which is important, both in itself, and in the fact that it gives provides us with a little more background for better understanding

this passage.

One reason this ceremony is taking place and such a big deal is being made of all this, is because, from this point forward, this relationship will be the definitive relationship upon which everything else that happens in the Bible and, indeed, in human history, will depend. It will become a fixed point of reference for understanding God's purposes for all time.

Now before this time there have been two other significant relationships or *covenants* in operation - one implied and the other more openly stated. First, there was the special relationship between Adam/Eve and God which, as you know ended in disaster. One of the consequences of that disaster is that *all the rules were changed*. Nothing was the same anymore. There was simply no going back to how things were before. Nevertheless, and in spite of mankind's sin, God's plan - which is not taken by surprise by any of this, mind you - continues to move forward.

Following the events with Adam/Eve, the next main relationship we see is God's special relationship with Noah who was the Father of what you might call the "Re-started Creation". The main thing about *that* relationship was that God promised to *preserve the creation as it was and not destroy it by flood again*. In short, God's covenant with Noah was a covenant of *preservation*.

In the making of that covenant, and because everything had started over, God re-issued the same mandates that he gave to Adam and Eve at the beginning - that Noah should be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and that he should have dominion - i.e., manage the creation on God's behalf.

Well more time passes until we get to the next significant relationship - that between God and Abram. And the thing you have to recognize is that *this is the first significant relationship that has been highlighted since the re-start of the human race* after the flood and, as such, is, the first expression or working out of the promise of Genesis 3:15 since then. If you remember, that was the promise in which God said that through the woman's seed one would come who would destroy the serpent - or Satan - and in the process would undo all the damage that had been introduced into God's world through sin. So, since the flood, God's setting apart Abram and his descendants is the beginning step in the working out of that promise in human history.

Accordingly, this is a HUGE moment in the history of what God is doing. That's why Moses has devoted so much time and space to the preservation of the story of Abram/Abraham's life and his special relationship with God. And that is one reason why this ceremony is so important. A lot of freight is riding on this thing. So, let's have a closer look at this event, but before we do, let's pray.....

(read Genesis 15:7-21)

As God is preparing to go through this ritual with Abram, before anything else happens,

He issues this formal reminder of how and why there is any relationship at all between He and Abram. He says, "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess."

If you were with us when we started this series then you will remember that UR was the place where Abram was, with his extended family, when God first singled him out and called him. God reminds Abram of this fact here, as well as reminding him of the purpose for his calling Abram in the first place - to bring him to a land that would eventually become the inheritance of his descendants.

This reminder from God produces a question in Abram's mind. He has responded to God and gone to this new land, and now has been up and down its length and has seen something of its size as well as encountering a number of different tribes and peoples along the way, many of them - as we've seen - more numerous than his own family/tribe. He has just defeated a coalition of 4 powerful kings - which was great - but in the end only accounted for a portion of the inhabitants in the land.

Even further, although Abram has expressed a sincere faith in God - only two verses before this, mind you - the reality is that he is still a man. He is a person, like you and me, who can move from faith to doubt, from certainty to uncertainty, from feeling confident to feeling not-so-confident *very* quickly.

The fact that he showed great confidence in God at one point is no guarantee that he won't need re-assurance again. And so, in spite of all that has gone before, Abram still has a question. He wants to know how he can know that what God has said will actually come true?

And so, in some ways, what we are seeing here is a repeat of what happened in the first six verses of this chapter. God tells Abram of some blessing and then Abram expresses uncertainty as to how such a thing could possibly take place - and God then takes steps to provide some assurance. The first time around he verbally assures him and then ties that assurance to something in creation - the starry sky. This time around God again verbally and visually assures him - but he goes even further in that he uses a ritual to *ceremonially or experientially* assure Abram, which is what this strange ritual is all about. So let's have a closer look at it.

Now, as you look at this rather strange ceremony that takes place the most natural question in the world is to wonder, "What is going on with this ritual?" What is *the deal* with the slaughtered animals and the fire pot and the flames, and all of that? What is all of this stuff about? And if, you're asking all these sorts of questions and if all this seems a little strange to you, well, my response is to say: "It ought to be". This is not a ritual that means *anything* in our culture or society. It's never the case that you are driving down Perkins Road and you look off in a field somewhere and see people walking around between the pieces of slaughtered animals. It's just not a big part of South Baton Rouge culture.

But back in Abram's day - and even before - it *did* mean something. It was a ritual that was practiced by a number of different peoples in those days. It was a ceremony that was used when a person wanted to make some sort of guarantee to someone or give them some sort of assurances about a promise or agreement that had been made between.

And, while it may seem rather extreme and bloody, the reality is that it was that way for a reason. It was, in fact, the most solemn and serious ritual you could undertake in that day. There was no stronger way to show that you meant what you said than to participate in this ritual. And the reason why is because of what the ritual *meant* or symbolized.

What did the ritual mean? Simply this: Animals were taken and sacrificed, and then divided into two halves - with the exception of birds which were so small that they were kept whole and then placed on one side and the other. Then the people who were entering into the agreement - whatever it was - would walk between the sacrificed and halved animals. And when they walked between the pieces they were saying this: That if I do not do the things I have promised, if I don't uphold my part of the deal, then may what happened to these animals happen to me. May I too be killed and my body torn into pieces.

I remember when I was a kid we would say and do all kinds of crazy stuff. And I can recall a number of times when I would be talking with my friends about something that had happened - that I had just seen this amazing car wreck or that aliens had just landed in my back yard - something ridiculous like that, and, inevitably, someone would say I was lying or exaggerating. And we would get into this little exchange where I would say, "I'm serious" and they would say "No way" and I would say "Look, I *promise*, I'm not making this up" - and this sort of thing would go on for a bit with one of us promising and other doubting.

And when that sort of thing was going on there was one sure way to bring it all to a screeching halt. And that was to add some sort of terrible oath to your promise like "Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye".

Now, I don't know about you, but in *my* neighborhood, the "cross my heart, hope to die" promise was just about the most serious promise anyone could ever make. When you pulled that one out, mouths dropped open, eyes went wide, and silence descended on the occasion because everyone knew you meant business. Because with the "cross your heart, hope to die" promise, you were saying "If what I'm saying isn't true, then I hope I die."

All of which is to say, taking these sort of extreme vows upon ourselves is, when you think about it, not all that unusual. And, this, obviously in a much more extreme and serious sort of way, it is what the whole animal sacrificing ritual in Genesis 15 was all about.

Now, you may hear all this and say, “Yes, but *still* - that’s pretty gruesome stuff”. And you would be absolutely right. *But, again, that was the point of this admittedly bloody ritual.* It was the sort of vow and promise you didn’t take lightly. It was the sort of ritual that you wouldn’t even *consider* undergoing unless you were absolutely sure that you were totally committed to whatever it was you were agreeing to. And because God WAS that committed to keeping his promises, He agreed to undergo this ritual. It was thing that, in that day and age at least, would have best communicated the *depth* of his sincerity.

Now, if God had been making the same covenant with someone in our day, he would not have undergone this sort of ritual because such a thing doesn’t mean anything to people today. He would have chosen some other means - some other symbol or ritual or ceremony that meant something *to us* - like signing some sort of contract with witnesses before some public official and putting up some amazing amount of collateral. I don’t know what the strongest form of agreement is in our own day - but whatever it is - that would have been the one God would use, if he were to make the same agreement with us.

And so, that is the sort of thing that is going on here. And it is important to notice not only God’s part in this whole thing - but Abram’s part as well. God makes this declaration in verse 7 and 8 of what he has done and will do and - in response, as we’ve seen Abram asks for some sort of assurance. In response God sends Abram on a mini-safari. Now *why* Abram gathers the particular ones he did we cannot say for sure. It no doubt was significant but what exactly it signified, we do not know and cannot say with any certainty. But, in the end, it is not that important for understanding this passage. The important thing is to note what he does with these animals he gathers - he kills them, cuts them in half (except for the birds) and arranges everything as it should be. And then he waits.

How long he waited, we cannot say precisely, but when you read in vs 11 about his chasing away these birds of prey, you get this picture of this older man, sitting out in a field, with these slaughtered animals all laid out, and getting up every so often to shoo away the birds with a stick or a rock or something, and then sitting down and waiting. And so he waits, all day long, maintaining this vigil until just before sundown, at which point the birds of prey would have returned to their nests.

It is at this stage that a deep sleep descends upon Abram - much like the one that descended upon Adam when God removed a rib from his side. And while he is in this divinely-induced sleep the text says “a dreadful and great darkness full upon him” which is just fancy language to indicate that he became aware of the presence of God. And it seems to me that we are meant to understand that this is an *extraordinary* manifestation of God’s presence - which may be the reason for the induced sleep because - in the face of such a strong manifestation of God’s presence, Abram simply would not have been able, in a conscious state, to endure the glory of such a thing on this very important occasion. That’s not for certain, but I think that something like that may be going on here.

More importantly, while Abram is in this state, he hears the Lord speaking to him and receives another affirmation of the promise. But he receives more than that on this occasion. He also receives some new information about some of the details of how God's plan is going to work out - both for his descendants and for himself. As for his descendants, we learn here that while they *will* inherit the land of promise - it will not be for quite some time - at least 400 years. Even further, they will only do so after becoming servants and slaves of another nation, and only after God himself delivers them by judging the people that are enslaving them.

In the face of this undoubtedly surprising and even disturbing news, God goes on, however, to assure Abram that he himself will not see this oppression spoken of but will in fact die at an old age, and in peace and that eventually his people *will* come back to this land - in God's good time. And please note that, in context, coming back in God's good time means that they will return not only when things are right and ready for *the people of God*, but also when the sins of the peoples who are currently in the land - representatively designated by the term "Amorites" - have reached their fullness.

In other words, God's giving the land to his people will coincide with his judgment on the nations that are there. Which means that when all of this eventually takes place, the one thing you will not be able to say about it was that it was a case of Israel going in and terrorizing and bullying "innocent" nations and peoples and illegitimately taking their lands from them. It will not be like that at all. Instead, as these words make clear, when God's people eventually take this land, they will be going in as *God's instrument of judgment* on a people who are *not at all innocent* and who are simply reaping the consequences of that from a just and Holy God.

Well, following these formal announcements and declarations we finally get to the conclusion of the ritual - the "signing on the dotted line" - aspect of the ceremony, so to speak. And at this point we get a manifestation of God - a *theophany* - in the form of a smoking firepot - which was like a small dutch oven sort of thing, and a flaming torch - that passes between the pieces. Now why God chose these two particular symbols is not clear. It is likely that they had a significance that would have communicated something special to the people in that day and were simply another example of God accommodating himself to something in that culture that would get his point across. Whatever the case, while we don't know much about the symbolism of the firepot, we can still say that at least His choice of *fire* as something which represents his presence was not all that unusual as it will happen again later on in Scripture - with Moses at the burning bush, and with the pillar of cloud and fire after that.

But, again, the main point not to be missed here is that while in the typical performance of this ceremony, *both parties* entering into an agreement would walk between the pieces of animals - in this case it is *only God who walks between the pieces*, by means of this theophany. And once again, please note Abram's role in all of this. He gathered the animals and laid them out, but after that he is reduced to the role of an observer. He's just watching all of these things take place.

And while we want to be careful not to over-read what is going on here, the very least that can be said is this: Apparently, God, in making this covenant, intended to take upon himself obligations and assurances that he did not ask or expect Abram to take. Now, if you remember from last week, we saw how the characteristic role of God in his relationship with his people is that *He is always responsible for the righteousness side of things*. And the characteristic role of his people is that they are responsible for *believing in and receiving that righteousness*.

In light of that, then, it is not surprising that we see God once again taking responsibilities and expectations upon Himself that are simply not true for Abram. In that sense, what is being formed here is a *unilateral* covenant. In other words, the full responsibility for seeing to it that things happen just as God has promised falls fully and completely upon HIM. More importantly, not only is God taking these things fully upon himself he is, by this action, demonstrating just how committed he is to seeing this thing through until its absolute completion.

And so God passes between the pieces, affirming once again as he does that he is indeed giving this very land to the offspring of Abram - and He even goes on to specifically name the ten nations that will be affected by the promise.....

Well, what are we to do with all of these things? As usual, our response to that question comes in two parts. Firstly we need to think about the significance of these things for God's people in Moses' day - since they would have been the first to receive these accounts. Secondly, we need to think about the significance of these things for us as people who live on the *other* side of the Cross.

Regarding the people of God who were with Moses in the wilderness, and who were the first recipients of these things which God had used him to record, there would have been a great deal of encouragement to be found in these verses - in a number of ways. They would have been encouraged by the reminders that God had promised Abram's descendants a *particular land* and, in fact, the land that was sitting right there in front of them, on the other side of the Jordan. They would have been encouraged and perhaps even amazed to see how serious God was about these promises - so serious that he would condescend to this very human ritual of confirmation.

Even further, they would have been encouraged - strangely enough - by seeing that the whole episode of their years of slavery to Egypt was not just a sad accident of history but was, in fact, part of the design of God and had actually been foretold to their forefather Abram hundreds of years ago. And not just their slavery, but their deliverance as well. These people could count as well as we can. And they could do the math and figure out that they were the generation being spoken of here. So, in at least three ways, they would have once again gotten the strong message that they were a people of destiny and that their future was not behind them - continuing to wander in the wilderness - but in front of them. The only path they had any business taking was the

one that their forefather Abram took - right into the land, to *finally* take possession of the place.

For people like us, who live many years beyond that time, who live on the *other side* of Jesus life, death and resurrection, these verses also have a great deal of importance - in spite of the distance - because we too are descendants of Abram, as Paul has made abundantly clear. The promises of abundant blessing are now ours through the Lord Jesus Christ. And so this is more than just an interesting story, it is a story *for us*. There are a number of points of commonality with which we can identify in this story.

For starters, think about Abram's response for a moment. We have noted these things about him before, but I want you to see, again, that no matter how faithful Abram has been, no matter how much or how well he has trusted God, the temptation to doubt God and to waver in his belief *was never very far away*. In this case, it is only two verses away. Look at verse 6 again. Right on the heels of this great moment - where Abram believes God and it is credited to him as righteousness - right on the heels of that we have this huge turnaround. The ink is still wet on those statements when we get to verse 8 where, after God reminds Abram of a further promise to give him a land to possess, Abram responds by saying, "O Lord God, *how am I to know* that I *shall* possess it?" It's like that old ABC sports commercial - the thrill of victory, followed closely by the agony of defeat.

But seems pretty familiar doesn't it? We know this dance, don't we? I certainly do. I seem to have an endless capacity for moving from great trust and confidence in God to fear and doubt and utter self-reliance - sometimes in the space of a few seconds. Not matter how many confirmations I have had of God's faithfulness, it seems that the ability to doubt him for the most basic of things is only ever moments away.

And under any other circumstances that knowledge would probably cause me to despair. But in my saner moments I look at Abram and see a man caught up in the same movement from - being blessed - to expressing doubt - to be assured - to responding in faith - to expressing doubt - to receiving assurance, etc. And I see him moving through those same steps and I see God so kindly and graciously and patiently responding to him and assuring him over and over again of his love. And I am encouraged and stunned and strangely comforted.

Another thing that stands out to me when I look at Abram in this story is *the way he waited for God*. Here he is, having gone out and acquired all the animals and having gotten them ready for the ceremony that God is going to undertake. And when all the preparations are finished he just waits. How long, we don't know. But the construction of the passage and the info about the birds of prey gives the impression that it probably was a good while, as we have already seen.

And as he waits, he busies himself with the task of keeping the vultures and whatever other birds of prey they had in that place away from the sacrificed animals. Now, I have never had to guard sacrificed animals from hungry birds, but I can imagine that it was

something that he would have had to do *repeatedly*. Every time he thought that he had scared them off, they would come back and have another shot at it. And so Abram would have done this, who knows how many times, until the sun went down. Now, I don't want to make too much of this, but it seems to me that in many ways this whole incident is a sort of microcosm of Abram's whole life - a life strongly punctuated by the theme of *waiting*.

Think about it. God singles Abram out and tells him to go to a land. So he does. And when he gets there he spends some time just traveling through it, not pursuing any particular agenda but just waiting on God to give him further instructions. When God finally does speak to him, he makes this wonderful promise which assures Abram that, although he and his wife are elderly - and she is barren - they will nevertheless be the source of a great nation.

This, of course is great news. And it is followed by *a lot more waiting*. Indeed, as much as ten years will pass between that initial promise and the events of chapter 16 - which we haven't even gotten to yet. But again, the point here is that *waiting* seems to have been a big part of Abram's experience of God. And you see this not only in terms of the promise of a son but also in terms of the promise of a land for his descendants. Because the reality, as we know, is that Abram himself is never going to fully possess that land and, in fact, none of his descendants will fully take possession of it until 400 years have come and gone. That's a lot of waiting.

And so, I look at this scene of Abram having prepared everything and then just waiting and looking after things while he waits for God to show up - and I am reminded very strongly of the parable in Luke's Gospel, chapter 12, where Jesus tells his disciples that they are to be like household servants whose Master is away - but who are expecting his return at any moment. They are to be dressed and ready, and to keep the lamps burning, ready for his unexpected arrival. I think about that and I look at Abram and see that one of the messages of his life is the message of *faithfulness while we wait*. We see that in Abram in the details of this account. And we see that as a general pattern of his life. And we hear the echo of that reality in Jesus' instructions to his own disciples.

And surely this is a familiar reality for us as well, isn't it? Doesn't it feel like that sometimes for you? Doesn't it sometimes feel like you're waiting for God to show up? You're going about your tasks, being faithful to what you know, keeping one eye on what you're doing, and the other eye on the door - waiting for that moment when the Master returns - that moment when everything will change. Doesn't it feel like that sometimes?

Well, let me tell you, if it *feels* like that it's because it *is* like that. Yes, to be sure, there is a sense in which God is always *here* in the sense that he inhabits his universe and there is no place that is outside of his sovereign presence and oversight. And yet in another, equally real sense, if the *return* of Jesus Christ means anything at all, it *must* mean that God is not now here in a way in which he one day *will be*. And until that time comes we wait, like Abram. We keep the vultures away, we keep the lamps lit. We

faithfully do the things he has left for his people to do. *And while we do them, we wait.*

And friends, a great deal of the Christian life can be summarized in just that way - faithfully living, faithfully watching, doing the same things, holding to the same things, walking the same paths, enduring the same suffering, engaging in the same battle - all the while knowing that we are waiting for God to show up. Because when he does, it's going to be *so good*. And it will be worth all the waiting in the world, whether its 4 minutes, or 4 weeks or 400 years, or 400 millennia. God's continual charge to his people in this regard is to trust him, to believe the promises of God, whatever that might mean, and wherever it might take you.

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