
GENESIS: IT ALL STARTS HERE

REMEMBER THE SMOKE AND THE FLAME!

GENESIS 15:1-21

1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." 2 But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." 4 And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." 5 And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 6 And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

7 And he said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess." 8 But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" 9 He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. 11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. 13 Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15 As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. 16 And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, 19 the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, 20 the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, 21 the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites."

INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning, the Bible tells humans how they may have right relationship with God. God's word comes in the form of a promise or "covenant," and humans are to respond with belief and trust. God is the author and actor on the stage of accomplishment, and those who experience God's blessing are simply those who trust in Him. God does the work, He applies it, and He promises blessing to those who love and trust Him. This is true from Genesis to Revelation, and it is true from the beginning of creation to eternity.

EXPOSITION OUTLINE:

(1) GOD PROMISED

(2) ABRAM BELIEVED/TRUSTED

(3) GOD ACCOMPLISHED ALL

EXPOSITION:

(1) GOD PROMISED

- ◆ GOD PROMISED A SON (AND INNUMERABLE OFFSPRING THROUGH HIM)
 - *"your very own son shall be your heir"* (v4)
 - We know that God's promise was unbelievable from Abram's perspective.
 - Abram and Sarai were both passed the age of procreation
 - Sarai was barren, and had not conceived any children even during her younger years
 - It had likely been some years since God had first promised to give Abram an offspring, and He had seemingly not been able to deliver so far (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:15-16).
 - *"Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.'* Then [God] said to [Abram], *'So shall your offspring be'* (v5)
 - If the promise of a single son was hard to believe, then this promise was infinitely more.

- Abram didn't have any children, and yet God promised that Abram would be the father of a great multitude.
- The difficulties above would have been compounded.

◆ GOD PROMISED A LAND

- ***"I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess"*** (v7)
 - A multitudinous offspring would only be a blessing if there is a domain to be established with such an assembly. And yet, this part of the promise is also quite unbelievable.
 - While Abram had just won a victory against powerful forces (Gen. 14:15), he would have been foolish to think that the defeated foe would not regroup with allies and retaliate.
 - Additionally, God's promised land was inhabited by quite a number of peoples and kingdoms already. Not only was Abram not powerful enough to conquer, he was not even powerful enough to maintain the brief victory he had already won.

◆ GOD PROMISED HIMSELF

- ***"Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great"*** (v1)
 - *"I am your shield, your very great reward"* (NIV)
 - *"I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward"* (KJV)
 - A "land" and a "son" would only make Abram like the kings of earth.
 - If Yahweh only promised temporal blessings, then He would be like all the other ethnocentric and geocentric deities.
 - Yet, this is not merely what the LORD promised. God promised Himself as Abram's present "*shield*" and "*reward*."

◆ WE CAN SEE HERE AN OT SHADOW OF THE GOSPEL

- Son/Offspring
 - Son or singular Offspring: “*Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring... who is Christ*” (Gal. 3:16).
 - Multiple Offspring: “*7 Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.... 9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith*” (Gal. 3:7–9).
- Land
 - The author of Hebrews tells us that Abram saw the ultimate fulfillment of this promise “*from afar*” (Heb. 11:13), but he expected the city, “*whose designer and builder is God*” (Heb. 11:10).
- God with His people, and their enjoyment of Him
 - John, the Gospel writer, says, “*the Word was with God, and the Word was God*” (Jn. 1:1); and that “*Word became flesh and dwelt among us*” (Jn. 1:14).
 - Jesus Christ is the One called “*Immanuel*,” God with us (Is. 7:14; cf. Matt. 1:23), and He is the delight of all those who love and trust Him.
- Altogether
 - The prophetic vision of John allows us to hear what will be the final fulfillment of all of this: The One upon the throne says, “*Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God*” (Rev. 21:3).

(2) ABRAM BELIEVED/TRUSTED

◆ ABRAM BELIEVED OR TRUSTED IN THE PROMISE OF GOD

- “[Abram] *believed the Lord*, and he *counted it to him as righteousness*” (v6)
 - Abram “*believed*” – the NT equivalent is “amen”
 - Abram affirmed what God said was true and trustworthy

- Abram believed “*the Lord*” – *Yahweh*
 - God is the object of Abram’s belief (it isn’t just wishful thinking or positive vibes).
 - Abram believed the covenant making and covenant keeping God!
- God “*counted*” Abram “*as righteous*”
 - Here we get to the heart of it!
 - How can God place His holy name upon the head of an unrighteous man?!
 - Does God lower His righteous standard?
 - Does God pretend that the unrighteous is actually righteous?
 - NO! God counts the unrighteous as righteous, and makes provision for just such an exchange! (more on this below)

◆ “TRUST IN GOD’S PROMISE” IS NOT MERELY A NT CONCEPT

- Adam
 - Immediately after Adam sinned, God cursed humanity and all creation along with a promise of hope: “*there will be an offspring who will crush the head of the serpent*” (Gen. 3:15). The very next thing we hear Adam do is call “*his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all the living*” (Gen. 3:20).
 - His words demonstrate his belief. Eve had no offspring at the time Adam named her “mother.” He showed his trust in God’s promise to make her the mother of the *serpent crushing son*.
- Noah
 - God proclaimed His plans for destruction and preservation (judgment and salvation), and Noah was the one man who enjoyed the position of blessing before God. Repeatedly Noah is said to have done exactly “*as God commanded him*” (Gen. 6:22; 7:5, 16).
 - The author of Hebrews helps us to know that Noah’s actions were a result of his trust/belief in the Word of God.
 - “*By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household*” (Heb. 11:7).

◆ THIS IS THE DEFINING MARK OF THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

- “[Abram] *believed the Lord*, and he *counted it to him as righteousness*”
 - The technical language for this is the doctrine of “imputation”
 - Simply put, the Gospel is a message of foreign, alien, and acquired righteousness.
 - **Hopeless – Passive – Beneficiaries**
 - Hopeless: Contrary to every other religious or philosophical system, Christianity makes the claim that you are absolutely hopeless. You cannot be better; you will not do better; and you are utterly unable to rescue yourself from your own sinful bondage and penalty.
 - Passive: The righteous Judge and Creator of all has looked upon hopeless sinners, completely rebellious towards Him, and He has acted effectively on their behalf. Christ, the sinless God-man, lived and died and took upon Himself the penalty of sin that guilty ones deserved.
 - Beneficiaries: God looks upon hopeless and guilty sinners and declares / counts them righteous for Christ’s sake, and not for their own. God “imputes” the righteousness of Christ to them, because He has already “imputed” their sinful guilt to Christ upon the cross. The righteousness they enjoy is acquired, and they become passive beneficiaries of Christ’s active work.

(3) GOD ACCOMPLISHED ALL

◆ THE STRANGE ANCIENT CEREMONY

- There is at least some semblance here of the ancient Suzerain-vassal Treaty
 - This treaty was an agreement between greater and lesser kings¹

¹The basic elements of a Suzerain-vassal Treaty are: “(1) **Preamble**—Identifies the parties to the covenant. (2) **Historical Prologue**—Outlines the history of the relationship between the suzerain and vassal and emphasizing what the suzerain has done for the vassal (e.g., military protection). (3) **Conditions**—Stipulates what the vassal commits to do for the suzerain (e.g., help fight in military battles, pay annual tribute, etc.), and, in some cases, what the suzerain commits to do for the vassal. (4) **Blessings and Curses**—Outlines the rewards for obedience and penalties for disobedience to the conditions. (5) **Witnesses**—Identifies third parties who are witnessing the treaty’s formation (e.g., the gods of each of the two parties). (6) **Documentation Provision**—Formally documents and deposits the

- It was an official and binding covenant between the two
 - Exodus 19-24 and the book of Deuteronomy are both lengthy and technical examples of this treaty
- This ceremony definitely fits another ancient practice that would have been known to Abram – the “blood-path covenant.”
 - The Blood-path covenant was used commonly to enforce military peace treaties, border agreements, and paternally arranged marriages.
 - Each party would pass through the midst of the bloody pathway, often stomping their feet to splash the blood upon themselves. This gesture would vividly illustrate the consequences each party would endure if the covenant was broken.

◆ ABRAM’S PASSIVE ROLE

- The Blood-path covenant is going along as usual from morning until dusk.
 - God commanded Abram to gather and arrange the animals, and Abram must have tried to busy his mind with the task so as not to become overwhelmed with fear at what was happening. He was entering into a blood-covenant with the holy Creator God... and there is no way this ends well for Abram.
- At dusk, there is a dramatic shift! The Scripture says, “*As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram*” (v12). This is the same language as the “*deep sleep*,” which came upon Adam when God took a rib from his side in order to create his helpmate, Eve (Gen. 2:21).
 - The Lord still speaks to Abram, so we may understand that he was conscious in some sense, but he is utterly incapacitated from any active role in this treaty/covenant.
 - After God clarified more of the substance of the covenant, the sun’s light had completely left the sky. Not only was it the dark of night, the weighty darkness of God’s presence had already descended upon the location (v12).

treaty with both parties. (7) **Inauguration Action or Sign**—Makes a visible declaration by both parties that the covenant is in effect.”

Lanier, G. R. (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). Davidic Covenant. In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

- Abram’s divinely-induced coma remained as two distinct objects passed between the pieces.
 - The covenant was ratified, and there are two responsible parties, but Abram has been excluded from bearing the weight of it somehow...

◆ CHRIST IS THE FLAMING TORCH!

- It is not strange that God would pass between the pieces by using some manifestation of His presence. The “*smoking fire pot*” is just such a mysterious object (v17).
 - God’s presence “*wrapped*” Mt. Sinai with “*smoke*” when He descended upon it to meet with Moses and His people (Ex. 19:18).
 - The presence God’s judgment and anger are often pictured with the imagery of “*smoke*” (Gen. 19:28; Deut. 29:20; 2 Sam. 22:9).
 - The prophet Isaiah says that “*smoke*” is among those things that provides a “*canopy*” for the glory of the Lord (Is. 4:5).
- Yet, the “*smoking fire pot*” is not the only mysterious object that “*passed between the pieces*” (Gen. 15:17). There was also a “*flaming torch.*”
 - Here we find a shadowy semblance of the Mediator to come!
 - First, God is a flaming fire, therefore the second party is God.
 - God spoke to Moses “*in a flame of fire*” amidst an unconsumed bush (Ex. 3:2).
 - God led the Hebrew people away from slavers with a “*pillar of fire*” (Ex. 13:21-22).
 - The Psalmist tells us that “*the voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire*” (Ps. 29:7).
 - Second, the distinction between the smoke and the fire suggest distinction in person as well.
 - Like the Gospel of John more precisely articulates, here we see both unity and diversity, sameness and distinction. It is certainly not explicit, but we are not forced to remove our NT lenses when we gaze upon this OT display of profound splendor!

- Third, in this ancient and obscure ceremony, we may see a clear statement of God’s promise to take full responsibility for Abram’s (and all those whom he represents) failure.
 - It is as though God says, “Let what has been done to these pieces be done to Me in the event of a failure on the part of either one of us.”
 - What an incredible promise!
 - The promise is that single promise to which the sinner clings for his or her only hope. The promise is: God is not my enemy but He is my Defender!
 - Oh, that my heart and yours would grab hold of this reality like never before. Our very lives depend upon our trust in this single promise. Have you joy? Have you peace? Have you security? Have you hope? You may turn nowhere else for these except here.

MY PRAYERS

- May God forgive us for our many sins, and may He forgive us for continuing to fail
- May God create convinced trust within us, so that we may rest assuredly in Him
- May God make us a people who believe His promises and remember the “flaming torch”

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