

*“Then Jesus answered and said to them,... ‘You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life;*

# And These Are They Which Testify of Me

Sermons on Genesis

He Believed God

Genesis 15

*With Study Questions*

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# He Believed God

*Genesis 15*

## **Preview:**

After God repeatedly reveals His covenant to Abram—that through him all the families of the earth shall be blessed, after God delivers Abram from his folly and deceit—having lied about Sarai being his wife, after Abram has a great victory over those who had taken Lot captive, after a wonderful and mysterious meeting where Abram was blessed by Melchizedek, chapter fifteen starts of with God consoling Abram and exhorting him to be of a tranquil mind.<sup>1</sup>

Abram is disturbed as to how he and his wife, being aged, will actually bear children. God, once again, reinstates His promise that the seed of Abram will be numerous. This time using the example of the stars in the heavens. Abram believed in the Lord and he counted it to him for righteousness. God reminds Abram of all He had done thus far, but Abram still questions God. In response to Abram's weakness, God performs a very unusual ritual, having Abram cut some animals in half, God then walks through them. Abram then falls into a deep sleep in which God reveals what his descendants will go through. The chapter ends with some very specific land promises.

## **I. Points of Difficulty**

### **400 Years?**

There really aren't any major points of difficulty within the text. The only one discrepancy a close reader might notice is the proclamation that Abram's descendants would be in captivity for four hundred years when Exodus 12:40 indicates the captivity lasted 430 years. At least two possibilities here exist. One, inerrancy of the Scriptures allows for the rounding off of numbers. To speak of 430 as 400 would be acceptable in most narratives. Secondly, it has been observed that they dwelt in Egypt for 430 years, but were afflicted for only 400 of those years.<sup>2</sup> Either answer is suitable.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. I*, (Baker Book House, reprint 1993), p. 399.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis*, (Moody Press, 1922), pp. 170,171.

## II. Points of Emphasis

### Our Shield and Reward

**“After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I *am* your shield, your exceedingly great reward” (Genesis 15:1).**

God had already granted Abram both wealth and victory. Yet God must still soothe Abram’s fears. For even though God had been very gracious to Abram, Abram was still vexed as to how God would go about granting the promise given.

How very like us. We, in the midst of the very course of receiving the promises of God’s blessing, are ill at ease that God is capable, or willing, to bring us where, or what, He promises. We come into the Christian faith with the idea that God will lead us, sanctify us, grant us abundance and conform us into the image of His own Son (Romans 8:29). Yet as we examine our path, our own foolish decisions, and whatever Canaanites there might be in the land, we become fearful that we have strayed too far. We have lost our course and possibly our reward.

But God is gracious. And I have little doubt that we can apply to us that promise applied to the father of the faithful. We ought not fear, nor be governed by fear. For God is our shield, that is, He protects us, even from our own folly as he did Abram with the Pharaoh of Egypt. And God is our exceedingly great reward, that is, the promises He makes are kept because of the character of the one who made them.

### A Pretty Legitimate Question

**“But Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house *is* Eliezer of Damascus?”<sup>3</sup>  
Then Abram said, “Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir” (Genesis 15:2,3)!**

Abram’s questions here before the Lord should not be taken so much as doubt on his part. After all, he is talking with God. But we are often too weak to believe how good God is. Abram and his wife were well past child bearing years and Abram was concerned that a foreigner would be the heir of his house.

The physical and natural reality which surrounded Abram very likely brought him to wonder how God could possibly work things out. I often find myself caught between the heavenly and the mundane. I have been told that I have been blessed “**...with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3).** But most of the time I feel like a guy who lives in

Torrance. The poetic majesty of my own spiritual reality somehow escapes me. God answers Abram.

### **Truth and Perspective**

**“And behold, the word of the LORD *came* to him, saying, “This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.” <sup>5</sup> Then He brought him outside and said, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” <sup>6</sup> And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:4-6).**

Here God does two things: He gives some necessary information—your heir will be from your own body. Then He broadens Abram’s perspective—He has Abram look at the stars and promises that his descendants will be as numerous. Both these things are profitable to have in our lives. Our moral compass and means by which we govern our thoughts must be true and objective, i.e. biblical. But it also does us well to ponder a horizon, a sunset, the stars, a garden, a redwood, etc. to help us get some perspective.

Every big decision or trial I have gone through in my life has found me gazing at the Pacific Ocean. The immensity of God and the puny nature of my problems seem to become clearer when gazing at His creation. My ability to cast aside encumbrances and make proper and wise decisions is ameliorated.

**The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork.<sup>2</sup> Day unto day utters speech, And night unto night reveals knowledge” (Psalm 19:1,2).**

Gazing at the stars, one must wonder if it made Abram feel insignificant or very significant. Perhaps both. Abram believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness. More on that later. The conversation continues.

### **How Shall I Know?**

**“Then He said to him, “I *am* the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it. <sup>8</sup> And he said, “Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?”” (Genesis 15:7,8).**

It is almost as if God had said, “I have brought you safe thus far, surely I will finish what I have started.” But again, we, like Abram, tend to grow anxious when the path isn’t as clearly marked as we would like. Wouldn’t it be

nice if, from time to time, God would put a mark in the road to assure us that we are proceeding down the correct path—to assure us we are still under His care and guidance? Here a very interesting thing takes place.

## **A Covenant God**

**“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.”<sup>10</sup> Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.<sup>11</sup> And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.<sup>12</sup> Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror *and* great darkness fell upon him.<sup>13</sup> Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land *that is* not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years.<sup>14</sup> “And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions.<sup>15</sup> “Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age.<sup>16</sup> “But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites *is* not yet complete.”<sup>17</sup> And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces” (Genesis 15:9-17).**

## **Cutting a Covenant**

So what is happening here. God commands Abram to take some animals and divide them in half.<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 34:18 reveals this to be the practice of those who make a covenant. Hence the term, “cutting a covenant” or “cutting a deal”. Generally speaking, the two men who made the covenant would walk through the divided animals as a sign of their commitment. But what we learn in verse seventeen is that it is God, and God alone, who walks through the divided animals.

## **A Sign For Me**

Abram wants to know with surety that he will inherit the land. God provides a sign to assure Abram that He is a covenant keeping God. So where is your sign that you are on the right path? Where is your sign that you will

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<sup>3</sup> I am not sure why he picked these particular animals, nor am I sure why he didn't divide the birds. Sorry. The driving away of the fowls from the carcass may be symbolic of those who wish to desecrate the sacraments of Christ.

inherit the land? Has God not given us a sign? Surely He has. The sign of baptism assures us that God washes away the sins of the faithful. The sign of communion continually reminds us that God has sealed us in Him and the blood of Christ cleanses from sin. His seal is upon us and we will most assuredly inherit the land.

### **Fearful Answer**

But along with this wonderful sign which would assuage the doubts of Abram, Abram would fall into a deep sleep in which a horror of great darkness would fall upon him. We must realize that when God answers our prayers there is no guarantee that He will pacify our flesh. Information would be given to Abram as to the nature of God's plan.

### **Abram's Future**

I would have to argue that this type of communication, that is of future events, is unique to those prophets of God and should not be thought of as the general means by which God interacts with His children. Abram is informed that there will be slavery and affliction. He also assures Abram that the captors of his descendants would be judged. Abram would himself live to a good old age. It would be four generations before his descendants would be delivered and actually take the land and here something quite perplexing and humbling is communicated. God explains, "...for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full."

### **Amorites**

Every now and then God reveals His perspective of history. The Amorites were the people of Canaan who would be dispossessed by the Israelites after the Exodus. Their evil was great. It reached its fullness. Yet at the same time we realize this to be all within God's divine providence. Many question it. We ought to revere it.

### **Land Promise**

Abram is then given a land promise.

**"On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates—<sup>19</sup> "the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites,<sup>20</sup> "the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,<sup>21</sup> "the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites" (Genesis:15:18-21).**

Many modern expositors will argue that this promise has not yet been fulfilled, but will be fulfilled when Jesus returns and keeps His promise to Israel. This position is fraught with difficulties, I will simply respond with Scripture.

**“So the LORD gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it. 44 And the LORD gave them rest on every side, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers, and no one of all their enemies stood before them; the LORD gave all their enemies into their hand. 45 Not one of the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass” (Joshua 21:43-45).**

### III. Primary

#### Justification by Faith

There is one statement made in the midst of this chapter that the Apostle Paul seizes to buttress his argument for, perhaps, the most important doctrine contained in all of Scripture, justification by faith. It is found in verse six. Moses writes of Abram, **“And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.”** Let’s read Paul’s comments on this verse.

**“What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? <sup>2</sup> For if Abraham was justified by works, he has *something* to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup> For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” <sup>4</sup> Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. <sup>5</sup> But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, <sup>6</sup> just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: <sup>7</sup> “Blessed are *those* whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; <sup>8</sup> Blessed *is the* man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin” (Romans 4:1-8).**

#### Saved by Faith

Herein lies the substance of that blessed doctrine which has come to be nicknamed Calvinism. In all of Abraham’s adventures and acts of faithfulness, it was not his acts of faithfulness that justified<sup>4</sup> him (although James points out that they evidenced the genuine nature of his faith). Abram believed God and it was

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<sup>4</sup> Justified is a legal, forensic declaration of acquittal.

accounted to him for righteousness. There is simply nothing a man can do to earn God's favor. We cannot make God our debtor. By grace we are granted faith and it is by that faith that God saves us. Neither baptism nor the sinner's prayer can save a soul. Salvation comes from above.

### **Double Imputation**

Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute sin, but righteousness. Impute means to credit to one's account. How vital is it for us to understand the gratuitous nature of God's grace! And how easy is it for men to muddy the waters, as it were, with an understanding of justification intermingled with the feeble exploits of dust.

### **Unlike My Neighbor**

We think we won't be tempted to applaud ourselves even though our understanding is that we, unlike our neighbor, met that conditions of salvation—we, unlike our neighbor, didn't resist the Spirit—we, unlike our neighbors, appreciate the cross of Christ. We may delude ourselves by saying, "I merely recognized how desperately sinful I was." But alas, now we must all applaud our wondrous humility.

### **Enjoying Jesus**

If the reformed doctrines of grace seek one thing, they seek to un-muddy the waters. Let us all recognize that the conditions of salvation were fully met by someone fully outside of ourselves—outside of any thought, word or deed we can muster. Let us exit this morning enjoying the victory of Jesus, imputed unto us.

## Questions for Study

1. How do you explain the discrepancy between the number of years of captivity (page 2)?
2. Why should we not fear that our path has become overwhelmed (page 3)?
3. How does God help Abram to gain a proper perspective concerning his fears (pages 3,4)?
4. Explain the idea of cutting a covenant? What is unique about the one cut by God (page 5)?
5. What kind of signs do we have of God's covenant promise (page 5)?
6. When God answers our prayers, we will always feel good about it (page 6)?
7. What do we learn about God from the comment about the evil of the Amorites (page 6)?
8. Has God kept his land promise (pages 6,7)?
9. What is the primary message in the chapter (page 7)?
10. Explain imputation (page 8).
11. How can we most enjoy Jesus (page 8)?