

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAM

Genesis 15:1-21
Key Verse: 15:6

Lesson 7c

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

Abram had just won a great victory. His shepherd's heart for Lot had propelled him into a war that he had not planned to be involved in--and, by God's help, he had won. Now, the war was over. Lot had not come back to share his tent life, but had returned to live in Sodom. Abram had seemingly gained nothing from this war. He had given a tithe of everything to Melchizedek; he had refused to take any of the spoils of war for his personal use. Before this war, he had kept a low profile in Canaan, but now he had become very visible--and vulnerable. He was sitting in his tent, nursing his sense of loss and entertaining all kinds of fears.

1. Look up at the stars (1-7)

"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.'" God's word was God's answer to his fear. "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield." God's word was God's assurance that he would lose nothing. God promised, "I am your very great reward." When we live by faith, these two promises are enough to bring deep peace and joy to our hearts. If God is my shield, who can harm me? He is God almighty. Legions of angels are at his disposal at any and all times. If God is my very great reward, what do I lack? God is the source of every good and perfect gift. He knows my needs before I know them myself. He himself is the only one who can really satisfy the needs of my heart.

But what about Abram? He was reluctant to let go of his fear and self-pity. This kind of human thinking revived his deep, long hidden problem. He had no son, no heir. He could not accept God's word. Instead, he cried out to God, "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no son." When we begin to look at ourselves and our lives without faith in God, everything looks hopeless and meaningless. This is what Abram was doing. God had promised Abram that he would make him a great nation. He had promised him descendants as numerous as the sands on the seashore. But Abram didn't have even one son. Before a man can have many descendants, he must have one son. Abram complained to God. But Abram was a man of prayer, and his complaint to God was his prayer.

God answered his prayer. For the first time, God specifically promised him a son from his own body. "Then the word of the Lord came to him: `This man will not be your heir, but a son from your own body will be your heir.'" Then God took him outside of his small, dark tent and made him look up at the stars. The black desert sky was filled with bright stars of all magnitudes. People who live in the city cannot imagine the splendor of the sky full of stars. God said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them." The Creator of heaven and earth had made each one and had hung each one in its place. The multitude of them filled the sky. God had made them and put them there, but Abram, bound by his human limits, couldn't even count them. The Almighty Creator God promised, "So shall your offspring be."

Abram believed the Lord. His inner fear disappeared. His worries about a future heir disappeared.

In reality, his human situation had not changed at all. Still, he had nothing in his hand; but now he had faith in his heart. This made all the difference. His outer circumstances had not changed, but his inner heart was changed when by faith he accepted God's word of promise. This made all the difference in his life.

God credited his faith to him as righteousness. This means that God forgave his sins. If Abram were not a sinner, he would not need to be made righteous. It means that God made a new and right relationship with Abram. "Righteousness" is a right relationship with God. Abraham was justified by faith. In Romans 4, Paul writes more about the meaning of this. He said, "If in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about--but not before God. What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." (Ro 4:2-5)

God makes promises. When a person believes those promises, God cleanses him from sin and takes hold of his life. He comes to dwell in the believing heart of one who accepts his word, and he establishes a right relationship with the one who believes his promises.

God knew that there was now another problem in Abram's heart, so he said, "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." When Abram despaired of having an heir, he had not been interested in the land. But now he believed that God would give him a son, so he became very interested in God's promise of land. He immediately responded to God's word, "O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" The rest of this chapter is God's answer to that problem.

2. To possess the land (8-21)

Abram asked, "O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" God answered this question in the covenant ceremony. This ceremony was based on similar ceremonies made to seal alliances between kings of that day. It was a blood covenant. It is also called a friendship treaty or covenant. Abram's friendship with God is sealed by this covenant. God told Abram to prepare the animals. He did so, and then he worked hard the rest of the day to keep the vultures away from the rapidly deteriorating carcasses. The covenant promises are stated in two parts.

First, as the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep, trans-like sleep. God's word came to Abram to reveal to him just how God would make of his descendants a great nation. 400 years of slavery and oppression would be the price. In the furnace fires of Egypt Israel would become a great multitude. In God's time they would come out with great possessions. If Abram's family had remained in Canaan, it would have been impossible for them to grow into a multitude such as this. As children were born, they would leave one by one, as Lot had done, and would be assimilated into the Canaanite culture and be melted into Canaan. But living in Egypt, in the land of Goshen, they would share a common history of suffering and oppression, and a common history of deliverance. They would be molded into a nation that would never lose its identity. They would come out of Egypt with great possessions, and would be used as God's instrument of judgment on the godless Amorite (Canaanite) people.

Second, when the sun had set and darkness had fallen, God himself accepted and burned up the offering with a smoldering firepot and a blazing torch. He sealed this blood covenant with fire. And he promised

to give to Abram's descendants the land. The land he promised was all the land Abram's foot had touched--from Ur beyond the Euphrates to the River of Egypt. He promised Abram the land of Canaan and more. He promised him the world.