

Genesis 15
Psalm 84
Romans 4

“The Abrahamic Covenant”

June 7, 2009

God says to Abram, “I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

What reward do you want?

If God came to you and said, “your reward shall be very great,”
what would you ask for?

In chapter 14 Abram had just turned down the plunder from Sodom and Gomorrah.

He could have had gold and silver and flocks and herds.

He could have taken all the plunder for himself –

and as the victorious warrior, no one could have stopped him!

But he turned all that down for something better.

And so the LORD comes to him and says,

I am your shield.

I will protect you.

Your reward shall be very great.

What’s he gonna get?

Actually, the translation here may not help us understand exactly what God is saying.

Literally it reads:

“I am your shield, your very great reward.”

What is Abram’s reward?

Abram’s reward is better than gold and silver.

Abram’s reward is worth more than flocks and herds.

What could be a better reward than God himself?

Children,

I want you to understand this.

What God promises Abram is *better* than anything you can imagine.

Do you know why?

Because life is nasty, short and brutish.

You know what I’m talking about.

Right now you are young and strong –

and yet when your leg cramps up in the middle of the night,

you feel in your own body the frailty and misery of this life.

And you know how sin plagues you.

You don’t like it when others say mean things to you –

and yet you say mean things to others!
And death lurks just around each corner.
Let me say this plainly, children:
one day you are going to die.
All the stuff, all the rewards, all the fun things will be gone.

What are they worth?

Psalm 84 is a commentary on Genesis 15:1.

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!
My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.”

I want to be with God.

Psalm 84 is a psalm for sojourners – for those who long to return to Zion.

Even the sparrow finds a home.
Oh, how I wish I was a sparrow –
that I could build my nest near your altars, O LORD of hosts!

I want to be with you!

“Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.”

Do you understand that?
Their hearts are set upon pilgrimage.
They long to be with God.

“For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.”

One day in the temple is better than three years anywhere else.

“I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of wickedness.”

Why?

We go back to Genesis 15:

“For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor.
No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.
O LORD of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you!”

The one who walks uprightly and longs for the courts of the LORD –
the one who trusts in God is the true Seed of Abraham.

And so let us sing Psalm 84 with Jesus!

Psalm 84
Romans 4

Genesis 15 concludes part 1 of the narrative of Abraham.

The focus in part 1 (chapters 12-15) is on the *land*.

We have seen how Abram has built altars throughout the land
as he sought to build the city of God through the worship of the living God.

Now in Genesis 15 the narrative begins to move from a focus on the land
to a focus on the seed (offspring).

Because in Genesis 15 Abram has two questions:

- 1) who will be my heir?
- 2) how will I know that I will inherit the land?

Verses 1-6 and 7-21 both follow the same pattern:

- A) the LORD makes a promise using the words “I am”
(I am your shield, v1; I am the LORD, v7)
- B) Abram asks a question using the rare form “Adonai Yahweh” –
perhaps best translated “Sovereign LORD”
- C) The LORD reassures Abram with a symbolic act

And as Abram’s questions suggest, the focus of these two parts of our passage
is first on the seed, and then on the land,
with God’s covenant declaring that he *will* give the land to Abram,
but also promising the seed that will be the focus of chapters 16-22.

1. Who Will Be My Heir? (15:1-6)

15:1 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.”

After these things – after defeating the Eastern Alliance –
Abram appears to be concerned.

After all, he has just defeated a powerful coalition of kings that may wish to take revenge!
But God says, “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield.”

And while Abram had passed up great wealth
in refusing to take the plunder from Sodom and Gomorrah,
God now says that Abram’s reward shall be very great.

As I suggested earlier, it is entirely possible that this should be translated,
“I am your shield, your very great reward.”
In other words, God himself is Abram’s reward.

But listen to Abram’s response:

*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."*

In those days it was possible to adopt a servant
who would then be the heir.

But I want you to see how Abram speaks to God about this.
God has repeatedly promised that he will give the land to Abram's children.
But God has not yet given Abram any children.

Do you sometimes wonder what God is doing in your life?
Do you ever complain and grumble:
"Why is God doing this to me?!"
Do you ever think that you have wasted your life serving God?
"Why did I ever listen to you?!"

I would like you to see how Abram is honest with God
and yet also submits to God at the same time.
God has just told him that his reward is very great –
but Abram does not yet see how this will work.
So what if I receive all this?
What is the point if my heir is a slave?

Abram believes God's promises,
but faith is not the same as Stoicism.

If your God is God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth,
then you can speak to him honestly about your concerns.
You can ask him,
"how does what is happening to me fit with what you have promised?"

After all, even Jesus did this when he asked,
"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But the point is that you come to him in faith,
trusting that God *does* know what he is doing –
and that he *will* work it out in the end!

*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."*

You need to realize how utterly absurd this sounds.

God is telling a man who is pushing 90 with no children
that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars of heaven.

6 And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Abram believes the LORD – even with very little evidence.

After all, God hasn't done much yet.

We look back on history,

and we see the Exodus when God delivered Israel from Egypt,
and the Conquest, when God gave them the Promised Land.

We see God's faithfulness to David and his descendents.

We see the fulfillment of prophecy after prophecy through the centuries
leading up to God's great mercy in Jesus Christ.

We see how the Word of the LORD has gone forth to the nations,

and how Abraham's seed are indeed as numerous as the stars of heaven.

But when God says this to Abram,

what does Abram have to go on?

Well, he still has a wife.

Though quite frankly, if God had allowed Pharaoh to steal her,
Abram might have been able to find a younger woman
who would be more fertile...

He defeated the Eastern Alliance –

but that only makes him a bigger target

(and perhaps a bigger threat to the Canaanites around him).

Why should Abram believe God?

There is a very real sense in which Abram believes God

only because he sees, by faith, that God is who he says he is,
and that God will do what he says he will do.

Abraham's faith is truly remarkable.

Abraham believes – not because of the evidence –
but almost in spite of the evidence!

He believes because he sees Jesus' day.

Or perhaps he sees Jesus' day because he believes!

In short, you see in Abraham why it must be true that faith itself is a gift from God.

Left to ourselves, we could always find some reason not to believe!

But Abram believed the LORD,

and the LORD "counted it to him as righteousness."

This is a legal reckoning

whereby God considers Abram righteous because he believes.

Implicit in this statement is the recognition that Abram is a son of Noah.

As God had said to Noah,
“the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” (8:21)
Abram is not inherently righteous.
He is counted righteous because he believes God.

And this divine reckoning qualifies Abraham to become the recipient of a land grant
which then will be inherited by his descendants.

Indeed verse 6 not only concludes the first part of Genesis 15,
it also launches the second part.

Because the next thing God says is about the land.

2. How Will I Know I Will Inherit the Land? (15:7-21)

*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.”*

Notice in verse 7 the formula, “I am the LORD who brought you out” –
it is the same formula frequently used to refer to the Exodus.
But here it is “who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans.”

8 But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?”

Once again, Abram is not expressing doubt and fear.
He is coming before the Sovereign LORD who has promised
and he is asking how he will know what God has said.
If you believe God, then you may certainly ask him questions!

He believes God, but his faith is seeking understanding.

And God honors his faith:

*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.*

In Hebrew the phrase “to make a covenant” literally means
“to cut a covenant.”

The idea goes back to Genesis 15.

In ancient treaties the animals were often cut in half,
and the two parties would walk between the animals,
as if to say, “May I be cut in half if I do not keep my covenant.”

Notice that God says to Abram, “bring me” these animals.
Abram knows what to do with them.
And so when he brought them, he cut them in half.

And now he waits for God.
After all, he knows what this is about.
God is going to cut a covenant with him,
so he is waiting for God,
so that he and God can walk between the animals together.

But God does not come down –
rather, the carrion birds come down!

11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

What are these birds of prey doing here?
Many have pointed out that birds of prey often symbolize conquering enemies.
And in light of God’s explanation about the meaning of this sign,
we should see the birds of prey as the Egyptians
who would come swooping upon Abraham’s children.

But Abram still waits for God.

*12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram.
And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him.*

Once again, Abram’s experience parallels the experience of his descendants.
Israel will descend into a great and dreadful darkness
when they go down in to Egypt.

*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.*

400 years.
Abram had asked, “how will I know that I will possess it?”
God now says, your offspring will be sojourners and servants.
They will be afflicted.

In other words, Abram,
your children will have it even worse than you do!

Some promise!

400 years of affliction.

Why 400 years?

God has often taught his people to be patient.

After all, *he* is God – *we* are not!

We need to learn to wait upon the Lord and trust that he knows what he is doing.

Do you sometimes get impatient?

Do you wish that God would make everything right, *right now*?

God says to Abram that his offspring will be afflicted for 400 years.

It may be that our children will be afflicted in this land.

It may be that the next few hundred years will be very difficult for Christians.

What should we do about it?

Some would say, “Oh, now is not a good time to have children!”

But watch Abram!

He sees beyond the 400 years of affliction.

He sees beyond the present trouble,

and he sees the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ

(“Abraham saw my day and was glad”).

God promised to Abraham the land, the seed,

and that all nations would be blessed through him.

Therefore he lived as a sojourner and a stranger in the Promised Land,

knowing that his children would be slaves,

but trusting that one day, long after he was dead,

God would do as he promised.

*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.”*

It is going to take 400 years

(four generations = four cycles of time,

and the typical life span at the time was around 100 years).

Too often we think that it all depends on us.

We’ve got to go out there and *do something!*

What could Abraham do?

What *does* Abraham do?

Abraham worships God.

We saw that all through Genesis 12-14.
Abram doesn't *do* anything.
He just worships God, and the salvation of God is revealed!

Ed Clowney got it right: "don't just do something, stand there!"

Sometimes we are too busy "doing something" and we need to slow down
and "stand there"
and worship God.

There is nothing that Abram can do to "speed things up."
His job is to stand there:

*17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark,
behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.*

Why a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch?
This is a picture of fiery judgment.
God's judgment passes through the animals,
even as the day of the Lord is revealed in fire (1 Cor 3:13).

When the iniquity of the Amorites is complete,
then the judgment of God will fall against the wicked nations,
and his people will inherit the earth.

God himself passes between the animals.
There is nothing that Abraham can do –
nothing that he can add to what God has promised.
God alone takes it upon himself to *do* what he has promised.

And by doing this, God also invokes a curse upon himself.
In ancient covenants the animals were torn in two
and the parties of the covenant walked together between the pieces
as if to say,
that even as the animals were torn in two,
so also may I be torn in two if I do not keep my covenant.

But Abram does not walk with God.
God walks alone.
There is no more powerful statement of the sovereignty of God in salvation.
God takes it upon himself alone to fulfill what he has promised.

And to Abraham God says,
"don't just do something, stand there!"

Stand, and watch *me* do it.

It is the same thing that God will show us in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“don’t just do something, stand there!”

Or as he had said to Abram in verse 1,

“Fear not, Abram, I am your shield, your very great reward.”

And you hear this in the covenant that God declares:

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.”

Ten nations are named

These are the nations that will fall under the judgment of God.

I said earlier that Abram does nothing.

That’s not quite true.

He does do something.

Somehow, four of these nations will drop off the list of condemned nations.

The Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, and the Rephaim.

The latter two seem to have died out

(Og of Bashan is said to be the last of the Rephaim),

but the Kenites and the Kenizzites have a more interesting future.

At least some of the Kenites become worshipers of Yahweh –

Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, was a Kenite,

and he is called a priest of God.

(He is also called a Midianite – and the Midianites were descendents of Abraham).

Apparently the Kenites were friendly to Israel when they returned from Egypt

(1 Samuel 15:6).

Likewise Caleb –

yes the famous Caleb,

as in the Caleb who joined Joshua as the two faithful spies –

that Caleb was a Kenizzite.

He was not an Israelite, but a descendent of one of these ten nations.

What does Abraham do?

He believes God

and he lives in a manner that is consistent with that faith.
And the result is that some of the Kenites and Kenizzites come to faith in his God.

I don't know whether they were converted in Abram's day,
or whether it was hundreds of years later.

But they came to faith because of Abram's faith –
it is because Abram understood
“don't just do something, stand there!”

I hope that God gives you more evidence to go by than he gave to Abraham.
I hope that you see more fruit in your life than Abram ever saw in his!

But the story of Abraham should remind us
that your faith (or lack thereof)
has repercussions that could last for centuries – even millennia.

What happens if Abraham says, “forget it, I'm done!”
End of story!
Close your Bibles – there is nothing more!

Now, it is true that Abraham is unique.
He plays a part in the story that is surpassed by few,
perhaps only by the Seed of Abraham, our Lord Jesus Christ.

But just as Abram's faith results in the conversion of these Kenites and Kenizzites,
so also your faith – as it is demonstrated in the way you live –
will also bear fruit in the lives of those with whom you come in contact.

How you train your children,
how you relate to friends and colleagues,
how you live day by day and moment by moment,
trusting in the LORD your God and believing his promises,
this is what changes the world!