

**Genesis 15:1-21**  
*God Promises a Son to Abram*

Sometimes it is very easy for us to become impatient

- Are you like that?
- I know that I have my days where I am impatient

We are promised certain things

- But the actual fulfillment of those promises is sometimes slow in coming

Impatience can manifest itself at home

- We complain when a family member does something that we don't like
- We are irritable when someone asks us to do something

Impatience can certainly manifest itself at work

- Others can press unrealistic demands on us
- In turn, we can oftentimes expect too much from others

Impatience can also manifest itself in religious matters

- As a pastor friend told me, "God sanctifies His people at a much slower rate than we would prefer"

We have all had times of impatience

- Times when something that we *thought* was going to take place didn't

In our ongoing study of Genesis, we have seen how Abram has been a blessed man

- God has promised "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; <sup>3</sup> and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:2-3)

God has also promised that Abram would have descendants

- Of course, this promise is remarkable because we know that Sarai is barren (11:30)
- As of this point, Abram and Sarai cannot have any children

Many years seem to pass since the time of God's initial promise of a son, a land, and a blessing

- Abram could very well begin to manifest an impatient attitude

This morning, we are going to see how God reassures and reminds Abram of these promises

**Let's read Genesis 15:1-21**

In Genesis 15, the LORD alludes to Abram's son and the land that his descendants would occupy one day

- The Promise of a Son (15:1-6)
- The Prophecy of the Land (15:7-21)

In each of these subdivisions, a common outline will follow

- God makes a promise to Abram
- Abram questions God

- God reassures Abram

A wonderful dialogue takes place between Abram and the LORD

- Of course, the LORD does the majority of the talking

## I. The Promise of a Son (15:1-6)

### A. God's promise to Abram (15:1)

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great."

The opening few words, "after these things" inform us that the passage in Genesis 15 flows naturally after the events of chapter 14

- Presumably after the war with the eastern alliance and his interaction with the kings of Sodom and Salem, Abram is once again approached by the LORD

The Text tells us that "the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision"

- We need to look at these words carefully
- Overlooking these important clues will only lead to confusion throughout the rest of the chapter

The specific phrase, "the word of the LORD came" occurs over 100 times throughout the OT

- It is a phrase that denotes the giving of additional revelation from God
- It is most often used by prophets who were the human vessels through which this additional revelation came

We must understand the Biblical context of Abram

- He had no pocket NT in his possession
- He didn't even have the OT
- More specifically, he didn't even have the Ten Commandments

If anything, Abram *may* have had access to some of the genealogical information that we read about in early Genesis

- But any type of formalized gathering together of God's Word was not available to him
- Thus, God makes Himself known to Abram "in a vision"

Abram is very much portrayed as a prophet<sup>1</sup>

- As a matter of fact, Abram will be referred as a prophet by name in Genesis 20:7
  - o God discloses future events to Abram
  - o God speaks to him "in a vision"

In most cases, what is being transmitted through a vision is not a visual image<sup>2</sup>

- Instead, it is the Word of God that is most significant

God's very words to Abram would have been very comforting to him, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great"

- Abram has just returned from fighting a war in which he rescued his nephew, Lot, from captivity

<sup>1</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Genesis*, 127.

<sup>2</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *NICOT, Genesis 1-17*, 418.

Then God appears to Abram reminding him of two important matters

“I am a shield to you”

- God was promising to protect Abram

The book of Proverbs says this in chapter 30, “Every word of God is tested; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him” (30:5)

Remember, Abram had just returned from a mission to *protect* Lot

- Now God was personally promising that He would protect Abram
- What a reassurance this must have been!

God had protected Abram even during times of disobedience such as Egypt<sup>3</sup>

- God had been very gracious to watch out for Abram and his family

Not only would God be a “shield” for Abram<sup>4</sup>

- God promised that his “reward shall be very great”
- This is God’s promise of provision

Genesis 14 ended with Abram *giving away* the victor’s spoils

- Here in chapter 15, we have Abram receiving a Divine promise of provision
- God would take care of Abram

It is intriguing that God’s first words to Abram are, “Do not fear”

- This is the same root word used of Adam when he uttered these words after attempting to hide from God, “I heard the sound of Thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself” (3:10, emphasis mine)

This is the first time in Scripture that this specific phrase, “Do not fear” is used

In light of what we will see throughout the rest of this chapter, it is very much possible that God was preparing Abram for what would take place

- Visions of smoke and darkness and terror would have caused great fear to come upon Abram
- God was getting Abram ready for his encounter with Himself<sup>5</sup>

So, God prepares him by commanding him not to fear

- Instead, Abram was to trust God

God promises Abram that He would be Abram’s Protector and Provider

- But even in the midst of these precious promises, Abram questions God
- That is where we now turn...

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<sup>3</sup> C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the OT, Genesis*, 135.

<sup>4</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 308.

<sup>5</sup> Hamilton, 418.

## B. Abram questions God (15:2-3)

<sup>2</sup> And Abram said, “O Lord God, what wilt Thou give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” <sup>3</sup> And Abram said, “Since Thou hast given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.”

For the first time in the book of Genesis, Abram speaks to God<sup>6</sup>

- Up to this point, when God spoke, Abram simply obeyed without speaking in return
- But now he dialogues with God

Even after being told by God that Abram’s reward would be “**very great**,” he still has his heart on something else

- Abram isn’t interested in fame and fortune
- Abram desires a son

In Abram’s mind, what use was it to have a multitude of possessions without an heir?

His concern was not so much that he didn’t have a male child

- Abram was concerned that he would never had a male child<sup>7</sup>

There was a custom in Abram’s day that childless couples could adopt an heir in lieu of having a child<sup>8</sup>

- This adopted heir could take care of the aging couple in their latter years
- This heir would ensure that they were properly buried
- This heir would also inherit any possessions

Three times Abram has been promised descendants<sup>9</sup>

- But he doesn’t have an heir as of this point

Up to this point in Genesis, to be “**blessed**” leads to a man being fruitful and multiplying his family

- But that is not the case for Abram
- Not yet

## C. God’s reassurance to Abram (15:4-6)

<sup>4</sup> Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.” <sup>5</sup> And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

The LORD emphatically tells Abram that Eliezer would not be the heir of the promise

- Rather, “**one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir**”

For a man in his 70’s to hear that he would have children must have been a challenge

- His wife, Sarai, is barren
- Neither is getting any younger

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<sup>6</sup> Sailhamer, 127.

<sup>7</sup> Hamilton, 419.

<sup>8</sup> Derek Kidner, *Tyndale OT Commentaries, Genesis*, 123.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Genesis 1-15*, 328.

- Yet, God promises that Abram would father a child before all is said and done

To illustrate and reassure Abram of God's promise, He took Abram outside

- The LORD said, “**Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them...So shall your descendants be**”

What an *amazing* time this must have been

- No doubt Abram had seen the stars before
- But now God was pointing that his children would be innumerable like the stars

Such a promise as this requires great faith

- Abram had no children
- Sarai was barren
- But God was faithful!

This isn't the first time that God has used an illustration from nature to portray the vastness of Abram's descendants

- He has already spoken of his descendants being like the dust of the earth (13:16; 28:14)
- Here he speaks of them being like the stars in the night sky (22:17; 26:4)
- Later on in Genesis, God will speak of Abram's descendants being like the sand on the seashore (22:17; 32:12)

Abram was concerned that he would have no male heir

- God was promising that great numbers would come from Abram
- It took great faith on the part of Abram to trust God
- That is what we see in verse 6

**6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.**

The only appropriate response to God's Word is faith and trust

- As the song goes, “**Trust and obey...for there's no other way**”

Abram's response to God's Word was one of faith

- The Text says that he “**believed in the LORD**”

This Text is cited four (4) times in the NT<sup>10</sup>

- Each time, Abram is listed as the example of saving faith

Isn't it interesting that God uses an OT believer who didn't even have access to the written Law of God as the example of what it meant to trust?

- Abram wasn't relying on the Law to save him
- Abram wasn't relying on his good works or merit to save him

Abram was relying on the LORD alone for salvation

God's response to Abram's faith was that He “**reckoned it to him as righteousness**”

- This is a precious thought that we need to develop

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<sup>10</sup> Romans 4:3, 20; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23.

Abram is not described here as *doing* righteousness

- Rather, his faith is “counted” as righteousness

Abram did not earn a righteous standing with God

- Rather, Abram simply trusted and believed in God

Belief or faith in God was a regular and constant part of Abram’s life

- This statement is describing the overall pattern of his life

It is not as if Abram didn’t exhibit faith before now

- The author of Hebrews writes, “**By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going**” (11:8)
- This goes back to Abram’s leaving his homeland of Ur, long before the LORD established a covenant with him

Of course, Abram had no idea that it would be another 25 years before he would see the fulfillment of God’s promise of a son<sup>11</sup>

- All he had now was God’s Word
- But that was enough for Abram

Abram has been reassured that he will, in fact, have a child

- But Abram is also reassured about the land that he has been told that he would possess
- That is where we turn our focus now

## **II. The Prophecy of the Land (15:7-21)**

### **A. God’s promise to Abram (15:7)**

**<sup>7</sup> And He said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it.”**

God promised Abram in verse 1, “**I am a shield to you, your reward will be very great**”

- In similar fashion, God promises Abram in verse 7, “**I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it**”

Lest Abram forget about the past, God reminds him that it was He that brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen 11:28, 31)

- It was God who brought Abram safely to the Promised Land

God had taken care of Abram

- Just as He promised back in verse one of this chapter

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<sup>11</sup> Kidner, 122.

## B. Abram questions God (15:8)

<sup>8</sup> And he said, “O Lord God, how may I know that I shall possess it?”

With this note of Divine promise echoing in his head, Abram questions God, saying, “O Lord God, how may I know that I shall possess it?”

- Abram’s faith was not failing
- But Abram wanted very much not to miss what God had in store for him

One day in the ministry of Jesus, a father approached Jesus begging Him to help his son

- This son had been demon possessed since his childhood
- The demons would throw him to the ground, thus inflicting pain and damage to the boy’s body

Distraught, the son’s father told Jesus, “if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!” (Mk 9:22)

- Jesus replied to him, “If You can! All things are possible to him who believes” (9:23)

In desperation, the father cried out, “I do believe; help my unbelief” (9:24)

God desires that we grow in faith and trust in Him

- There is nothing wrong with having little faith
- As long as you are not content to remain in that condition

This father had approached Jesus’ disciples who couldn’t cast out the demon

- Fearing that his options were exhausted, he approached Jesus with a request to help his son
- The father knew that Jesus could help; otherwise, he would have never brought his precious son to Jesus
- His faith was low; thus, He asked Jesus to help his unbelief!

I believe that Abram was in a similar situation

- He believed in God and His Word
- But he needed some strength and reassurance since the fulfillment of those promises was not imminent

Notice that there is no Divine rebuke to Abram

- God granted his request for some type of confirmation of the promise

## C. God’s reassurance to Abram (15:9-21)

<sup>9</sup> So He said to him, “Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” <sup>10</sup> Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. <sup>11</sup> And the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.

Previously, God reassured Abram’s anxiety about the promise of a son by taking him outside and showing him the stars

- According to God, Abram’s descendants would be like the stars of heaven

But God’s means of reassuring Abram about the promise of the land would be a little different

God told Abram to gather a heifer, a female goat, and a ram – all three-years-old

- In addition to this, Abram was to bring a turtledove and a young pigeon

For those of you who know the Old Testament pretty well, the first three animals should be pretty familiar to you

- They were used fairly regularly in sacrifice

But as you read this passage, sacrifice is not in view<sup>12</sup>

- There is no blood shed
- There is no altar set up

Up to this point, Abram has built three (3) altars

- But he doesn't do so here

Around this time in the Middle East, there was a ritual that was well-known

- It was a ritual that conveyed the sense of a covenant

When two people wanted to enter into a covenant, they would take these animals and cut them in half

- They would put one half on one side
- And they would put the other half on the other side

The dead animals would create a passageway or walkway between them

- The two people would then walk between the dead animals

The significance of this ritual was that these two people were pledging to honor and be faithful to the covenant

- If they were unfaithful in keeping the covenant, they were acknowledging that they, too, would become like these slain animals

*Thus covenants were not something that was to be taken lightly*

So Abram quickly gathered the animals and prepared everything for this ritual

- Once again, this shows the quick obedience of Abram
- He is now willing to trust the Lord

The Text records that nothing happened immediately

- After a little while, “**the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away**”

Keep in mind that Moses is writing this some time after the actual events had transpired

- The nation of Israel is looking back to Abram as an example of one who trusted and obeyed God, even when it didn't make sense

The specific term “**birds of prey**” may be used of those who would stand in opposition to Israel

- In other passages of the OT, this specific phrase refers to foreign nations that could present obstacles in the path of Israel<sup>13</sup>

Let's also keep in mind that this passage in Genesis 15 is presented as a “**vision**” (15:1)

- So some things might be symbolic

If the “**birds of prey**” are foreign nations, then the sacrificial animals must represent Israel

- Abram is seen to be protecting his descendants

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<sup>12</sup> Hamilton, 433.

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton, 433.

This makes sense in light of chapter 14 where he went after the eastern alliance and defeated them

- Why was he involved in this conflict?
- He was *protecting* his nephew, Lot

<sup>12</sup> Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him.

Abram has been obedient in preparing the animals for this ritual

- He has chased off these “birds of prey”

But one thing is missing

- Who will walk with Abram through these animals?
- With whom will he be in a covenant?

By this time, the sun is going down

- Moses writes that “a deep sleep fell upon Abram”

This isn't the first time that God puts someone to sleep

- Back in Genesis 2:21, God put Adam to sleep in order to fashion a woman from his side
- God was preparing to do something very remarkable with Adam; therefore, He put him to sleep

Here in chapter 15, God is preparing to do something very remarkable with Abram

- Thus, He puts him to sleep

Exactly how Abram can be receiving this vision and still be aware of night and day, sleep and alertness is beyond me

- I don't think that the minute details that we *don't* understand should keep us from the issues that we *do* understand

Abram is very much aware of what is taking place

- As a matter of fact, “terror and great darkness fell upon him”

We are accustomed to thinking of God's presence in terms of glorious light and shekinah glory

- But the manner in which God manifests His presence to Abram is quite different
- *How would you feel when Divine glory and perfection manifested Himself to you?*

The presence of God should *never* make us comfortable

- The prophet Isaiah was brought into the presence of God and here is how he responded, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (Isa 6:5)
- When Jesus told Peter to cast his nets on the other side of the boat, such a great load of fish was taken that it required two boats. What was Peter's response? “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” (Lk 5:8)

So much of what is deemed “Christian” these days is an attempt to make people feel comfortable at church

- The goal is to remove as much of the offense of the Gospel as possible

But as human beings who fall woefully short of God's perfect expectations, is this really what we should be pursuing?

- Should we not have a response like Isaiah, Peter, and Abram?

- When finite sinners come into the presence of infinite holiness, should there not be a terrifying sense of being uncomfortable?

<sup>13</sup> And God said to Abram, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. <sup>14</sup> But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve; and afterward they will come out with many possessions. <sup>15</sup> And as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. <sup>16</sup> Then in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete.”

Out of this terrifying darkness and terror, God speaks to Abram

- His words are nothing that we would expect

Abram was told that his descendants would be “strangers” where they will be “enslaved and mistreated four hundred years”

- God was prophesying what would take place in the future of Abram’s descendants!
- Abram doesn’t have any children at this point!

Abram didn’t ask for this

- But God told him regardless

Abram was told that his children would suffer and be mistreated for 400 years

- This seems to be a round number for the specific amount of time that Israel actually spent in Egypt
- Exodus 12:40 tells us that the exact number was 430 years

These many years of bondage in Egypt would take place toward the end of Genesis and beginning of Exodus

- God would use Moses to bring His people out of Egypt

At the end of this period of time, Israel would return to the Promised Land

- But they would have to defeat many pagan nations in order to take over the Promised Land

God had delayed judgment for 120 years before judging the people in the Flood

- Likewise, He waits 400 years before sending judgment upon the “Amorite”
- This was a term that was a summary term for all the inhabitants of the Promised Land<sup>14</sup>

Even though Israel would go through a grueling time of suffering, they would come out

- As a matter of fact, God promised that after their return “they will come out with many possessions” (15:14)
- We know this was true when Israel left Egypt

We also know that this was true when Abram left Egypt

- Pharaoh gave him gifts in exchange for Sarai
- But even when Pharaoh drove them from Egypt, Abram was allowed to keep those possessions

God also speaks of Abram’s death

- What a humbling and sobering reality for Abram to hear the LORD speak of his death
- This would have brought his life into perspective

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<sup>14</sup> Wenham, 332.

God promised that Abram would be spared this time of exile and suffering

- He would reach an old age before dying

<sup>17</sup> And it came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. <sup>18</sup> On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying.

After the sun had set, there was great darkness

- The next thing that Abram sees is “a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces”

God manifested Himself in the form of fire and light

- This demonstrated God’s power, holiness, and judgment
- He lit up the night sky as He “passed between these pieces”

Later on as the children of Israel were led out of Egypt, God provided direction in a pillar of cloud and fire<sup>15</sup>

Obviously, the meaning of this was very clear

- Abram would not be walking with anyone between these animals

God, and God alone, performed this ritual of covenant

- This was to signify that it was God, and God alone, that would see to it that this covenant would be fulfilled

We call this type of covenant unconditional<sup>16</sup>

- The promises of the Abrahamic covenant would not be contingent upon mankind<sup>17</sup>
- The promises would be entirely contingent upon the faithfulness of God Himself
- He, and He alone, had taken the initiative to enter into a covenant with Abram
- Abram was very much a passive by-stander instead of an active participant

“To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates: <sup>19</sup> the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite <sup>20</sup> and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim <sup>21</sup> and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite.”

Moses closes this section with listing ten (10) people groups who were currently inhabiting the Promised Land

- It would not be until after this 400 years of exile were over that Israel would occupy this Land

The boundaries of the Land are given, “**from the river of Egypt as far as the great river...Euphrates**”

- Some have pointed out that this relates closely to the dimensions of the Garden of Eden<sup>18</sup>

God not only prophesied about the time of exile for Israel in the future

- He also promised that Israel would occupy the land

***While Israel would be fickle, God would be faithful***

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<sup>15</sup> Keil and Delitasch, 138.

<sup>16</sup> John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison*, 187.

<sup>17</sup> Kidner, 125.

<sup>18</sup> Sailhamer, 131.

The partial fulfillment of the promise about the Land would be over 400 years away

- Even after Israel returned from Egypt, they still didn't fully possess the entirety of this Land

The promise about Abram having a son would be another 20+ years

We can all become rather impatient as we wait for God's promises to come true

- We are impatient, wanting immediate answers

We even joke about this, saying, "Lord, I want patience, and I would like it now."

But the reality is that patience is a result of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives

- We can't be patient in and of ourselves
- God has to do a special work in our lives

But God is faithful

- We shouldn't interpret a slowness of fulfillment as a lack of faithfulness on God's part

Like Abram, we have to be faithful, trusting God and taking Him at His Word

Abram is presented as a model and example to future generations of what it means to believe and follow God

- The New Testament would affirm that "**it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham**" (Gal 3:7)

Some Jews are currently putting their faith in the physical, literal lineage of Abram

- However, that is insufficient

To be a child of God, we must believe God as Abram did

- As a pattern of our lives, trust and obedience must characterize us

*Is that the case with you this morning?*