

People of the Word Lesson #5 – God’s Covenant With Abram
Genesis 15:1-18:33
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It is a special blessing to be here with you at this church. As Carol and Maggie have previously shared with you, People of the Word has been on a unique faith journey for the last six-to-seven months. The scope of this journey is nowhere near as large, historic, or momentous as Abram’s that we began reading about in last week’s lesson and continue in this one. However, it is no less a faith journey. Upon confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, each of us commences on our own faith journey. We have moments of victories, and we have moments of failures. The good news is, and it is proven out repeatedly in today’s reading, whether we succeed or fail, God’s character and His covenants are unchangeable – they are immune to our roller coaster acts of faith. Praise God, His mindset towards those who believe in Him is unwavering as described in Jeremiah 29:11, *“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”*

To help us navigate today’s reading, we’re offering the following outline:

- I. When Abram got it right (Chapter 15)
- II. When Abram got it wrong (Chapter 16)
- III. God’s Faithfulness (Chapters 17 & 18)

Starting with what Abram got right, chapter 15 opens up with the fourth appearance from God to Abram. He offers a wonderful promise to Abram, “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.” To refresh your memories from last week’s lesson, in an effort to rescue his nephew Lot, Abram had led a small band of warriors in a shocking defeat of a much larger army. In addition to rescuing Lot, they recovered the goods and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. The king of Sodom offered a reward to Abram, but he refused. With this victorious backdrop, it would seem strange for God to feel compelled to tell Abram to not be afraid. However, given the disparity of the sizes of Lot’s group of warriors and the size of the collective armies they defeated, Abram was probably thinking, *‘I may have won this battle, but these guys are probably going to retaliate.’* If this was a concern was in Abram’s mind, then that would line up with God’s assurance that He was his shield. God knows our hearts better than we do, so when He speaks to us, we need to listen.

Verse 1 is the first time we read of the phrase “Do not be afraid” or, similarly, “Fear not” in Scripture. We are speaking of ungodly fear. This is the first of almost 180 times God implores us to not be afraid. Fear grips the heart of every individual in one way or another. The fruit of fear is virtually endless and, without exception, it is corrosive to the soul, heart, and mind. The root of fear is sin – our sin nature. What was Adam and Eve’s first reaction to God’s presence after they sinned? - To hide in fear. What is the solution to fear? God’s love. 1 John 4:18 confirms this, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.” There is an inverse correlation between faith and fear. The greater the faith we have in God’s love for us – as our shield and reward, fear will possess a smaller voice to call into question the certainties of our faith.

The conclusion of verse 1 is God would be Abram’s very great reward. This is God likely responding to Abram’s righteous refusal to accept anything from the king of Sodom. Arthur Pink said, *“The refusal to be enriched by the king of Sodom is now compensated, more than compensated by a revelation from God which would greatly increase the joy of His servant. God never permits His own to lose for honoring Him and seeking His glory.”* Jon Courson said in his commentary, *“What every person ultimately desires is not something from the Lord, but simply more of the Lord. Those who come to the Lord not looking for something from Him, but simply to cling to Him find all kinds of blessings in all sorts of areas they never expected.”* A good question to ask ourselves is how much are we losing today because of our acceptance of the world’s favors in exchange for waiting on God’s promised rewards?

In verses 2-3, Abram responds to the Lord’s promise that He is Abram’s very great reward by focusing on his primary concern – he did not have a son of his own to continue his legacy. The custom of the day

was such that if a man had no son, his highest-ranking servant would inherit his wealth. Abram's questions are not from a lack of faith as evidenced of the absence of a rebuke from the Lord. Additionally, Abram recognized heirship was based on sonship. This principle has a significant spiritual truth for each of us today. Because of God's Son and His redemptive work at the cross, we are rightful heirs to God's very great reward.

- Romans 8:16-17a: "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ,"
- Ephesians 1:5,11a: "having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.... In Him also we have obtained an inheritance."

Psalm 16:5 connects God's promise of being Abram's very great reward, Abram's understanding of heirship through sonship, and the above verses, "O LORD, *You are* the portion of my inheritance and my cup."

In verses 4 and 5, the Lord affirms to Abram that his servant will not be his heir, but he'll have a son from his own loins, and through this son, his offspring will be more than the number of stars in the sky. J. Vernon McGee appropriately commented, "*Abram actually has two seeds. He has a physical seed – the Nation of Israel, and he has a spiritual seed – the church.*" This is proven in Galatians 3:29: "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." The writer of Hebrews referenced this verse regarding the countless numbers of Abram's seed in verse 12, "Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born *as many* as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore." Here's a little nugget that I hope you'll hold onto. What's one thing that is even greater than the number of sands? Check out the answer in Psalm 139 17-18a: "How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them! *If* I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand;"

At verse 6, "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness," we arrive at one of the most important verses in all of Scripture. On this verse alone we could spend multiple lectures teaching. Mercifully, you only have to hear me every so often, so I'll have to let God do some teaching with His Word. Let's look at a couple of verses that pull from verse 6.

- Romans 4:5: "But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness."
- Galatians 3:6-9: "just as Abraham "believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Therefore, know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." So, then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham."

Jon Courson noted, "*So important is this verse that Paul anchors his definition of salvation upon it in Romans 4 and Galatians 5. The Hebrew word translated "righteous" is literally "rightly clothed." Just as God sacrificed an animal to clothe Adam and Eve, He sacrificed His Son to clothe us.*" Listen to the words of Isaiah 61:10: "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks *himself* with ornaments, and as a bride adorns *herself* with her jewels." The robe of righteousness – the best designer label we could hope for!

Arthur Pink said in his commentary, "*This is not the first time Abram believed God – he obeyed him (mostly) when he left Ur. Why is it with this statement of belief that he is accounted righteous in God's eyes? Because in Genesis 15 Abram's faith is directly connected with God's promise respecting his "seed," which "seed" was Christ.*" This is confirmed in Galatians 3:16: "Now to Abraham and his Seed were the

promises made. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as of many, but as of one, “And to your Seed,” who is Christ.” The faith which was “counted for righteousness” was the faith which believed what God had said concerning the promised seed. He believed the promise of God which, ultimately, pointed to Christ.

Moving to verses 9-10, J. Vernon McGee noted, “*When made a contract in that day, this is the way they made it. Suppose one man agreed to buy sheep from another one. They would prepare a sacrifice in this manner. The party of the first part joined hands with the party of the second part, they stated their contract, and then they walked through the sacrifice.*” As we continue to read through this contracting scene, we see God had Abram fall into a deep sleep. Apparently in his sleep, God laid out a 7-fold, and ultimately completely fulfilled, prophecy in verses 13-16:

1. Abram’s descendants were to be strangers in a land not theirs (v. 13)
2. In that strange land, they were to serve (v. 13)
3. They were afflicted for 400 years (v. 13)
4. The nation whom Abram’s descendants served God would judge (v. 14)
5. Abram’s offspring would come out of Egypt with great substance (v. 14)
6. Abram, himself, would be spared these afflictions – he should die in peace and be buried at a good old age. (v. 15)
7. The fourth generation of Abram’s descendants would return to Canaan (v. 16)

From these prophesied events, Abram learned that inheritance can be reached only through suffering. The topic of God’s people suffering is perhaps one of the greatest stumbling blocks for believers. They simply can’t get there that God would allow or initiate suffering for His own children. Yet, look what His Word says:

- Romans 8:17: “and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together.”
- Acts 14:22: “strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting *them* to continue in the faith, and *saying*, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.”

In verses 13 and 16, we see the grace of God – He gave the Amorites four hundred years to see if they would turn to Him. The *only* one in that land who turned to Him was Rahab the Harlot. God preserved a nation of people for 400 years knowing (given He is omniscient) that *only one person* would turn to Him. Yet, that one person would end up in the genealogy of Jesus. At the end of 400 years, not coincidentally the same amount of time the Jews were in Egypt, God ordered the extinction of the Amorites by Joshua.

In verse 17, we read, “When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.” Both the smoking firepot and the blazing torch speak of Christ. The furnace speaks of judgment. The lamp speaks of Him as the light of the world. This scene of dividing the sacrifice and walking through them is critical for us to understand. As we said earlier, *both* parties would walk through the divided sacrifice to ratify the contract. In verse 17, *only God* is going to go through the sacrifices because God is promising something, but Abram is not going to go through because Abram is not promising to do a thing. As Jon Courson said about this, God is saying, “*I’m not going to meet you halfway. I’m going to do the whole thing.*” This covenant was based on death. Ultimately, the covenant would be confirmed with the death of Christ.

In verses 18-21, God lays out the boundaries of the Promised Land. This land went from the Nile to the Euphrates – covering some 300,000 square miles. The most Israel has ever possessed of this land was 30,000 square miles under Solomon’s reign. To help you visualize the original size of the Promised Land vs. what the Jews ended up with, please see the map at the top of the next page:



The red border are the original boundaries, while the brown shaded area represents what the Nation of Israel ended up with. God did not back down on His promise, so it was the Jews, out of a lack of faith, did not pursue the fullness of God's promised blessing – they only took hold of 10% of what God promised. Is that the case for us? A good exercise for each of us is to see how much of our lives are being lived out according to all the promises of God. This should be done absent of self-condemnation because there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. However, what "territory" that God has promised you are you not taking hold of?

Getting back to our outline, we've covered what Abram got right in chapter 15. In chapter 16, we're going to see what he got wrong. Abram picked up two things down in the land of Egypt which really caused him trouble: one was wealth, and the other was Hagar. Abram is now 86, Sarai is 76. It's been roughly eleven years since God promised Abram a son. It's easy to criticize and judge Sarai and Abram for their failure in this chapter, but think for yourself – what have you waited patiently for over 11 *years*? I am not a patient person, so waiting 11 *minutes*, can seem excruciating to me. When God gives a promise, there is often a gap of time between the giving of the promise and the fulfillment of the promise. Jon Courson says, *"God's delay is due to preparation, for He is preparing us in the arena of faith. If there is no struggle, faith never soars."* Arthur Pink added, *"It is one thing to 'commit' our way unto the Lord, but it is quite another to trust also in Him, and wait till He brings it to pass."*

Abram and Sarai were brought up in Ur of Chaldees where, in the event a woman could not produce an heir, the practice of using a slave to generate the heir was a common practice. Therefore, for that time in history, the moral angle was not the thing that for them that was so wrong. The real issue was that they just did not believe God's promise. Sarai was wrong to suggest this, but Abram came into agreement with her recommendation, so they're both on the hook for this plan. In trying to give God a hand, in trying to help Him out, Abram and Sarai unwittingly gave birth to the Middle East tension that exists to this day.

Not surprisingly, the relationship with Hagar and Sarai sours after the birth of Ishmael – Hagar is likely bragging that she could produce a child, and Sarai is now hating her for her success. Abram, already wearing the badge of "World's Worst Husband" from chapter 12, fails again in his role as the head of the house and leaves it to Sarai to resolve her problem with Hagar. Hagar runs away from Sarai to the wilderness, and we see a beautiful display of grace from what is very likely a Christophany or Theophany - a preincarnate Christ appearance. This is the first time the phrase, "the angel of the Lord," appears in Scripture. The word translated "angel" means "messenger." Throughout Scripture, angels refuse to be worshipped, so since this angel receives worship in verse 13, this is no ordinary angel.

This is also the first time we see a visit to a spring, or a well. Look whose there – the One who gives living water. Where is the well found? In the wilderness. When we are in our own "wilderness," we are more likely going to be looking for that well of refreshment or relief than we are when things are going well. The Bible speaks repeatedly of a well in the wilderness, and there is a correlation from the well to God's presence and provision. Why is it that we wait until times are difficult until we seek God?

The Angel of the Lord informs Hagar that she is to return to Sarai and submit to her. She will give birth to a son, name him Ishmael (which means "God will hear"), God will increase her descendants to too

numerous to count, and Ishmael will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers. The descendants of Ishmael are wild men – that has been the story of those Bedouin tribes of the desert down through the centuries, and it is a fulfillment of God's prophecy.

So, Ishmael means God will hear, and, in verse 13, she gave the name to the Lord God who sees me. Notably, Hagar wasn't looking for God; it was God who saw Hagar. This is our Good Shepherd – He searches and meets us in the wilderness, He hears us, and provides us a well of living water.

Heading into chapter 17, it's been 13 years since Abram's failure – he is now 99. The Lord has likely been very quiet during this span of time. Arthur Pink said in his commentary, "*God has more than one reason for His delays. Often it is to test the faith of His children, to develop their patience, to bring them to the end of themselves. His delays are in order that when He does act His delivering power may be more plainly evident, that what He does may be more deeply appreciated, and that in consequence He may be more illustriously glorified.*"

At 99, the Lord appears to Abram and says, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." He reveals Himself by a new name – El Shaddai, the Almighty God. Jon Courson notes, "*El signifies the right arm, and speaks of strength. Shaddai speaks of a woman's breast, and speaks of nourishment. Thus, God is the mighty One who sees us through with the right hand of His strength as He nurtures us as tenderly as a mother does a newborn baby.*" As for the command to walk before God, Pink makes a great point on the power of a preposition in our walks of faith, "*We walk "before" God as children; we walk "after" Him as servants; we walk "with" Him as His friends; we walk "in" Him as members of His body.*"

In verse 2, we read the first of thirteen mentions of the word "covenant" in this chapter alone. This is God's fifth appearance to Abram. Courson notes in verses 3-8, there are four elements in the following summation of the Abrahamic covenant presented in chapters 12-15.

1. Verses 3-6: The *principle* of the covenant. The principle is grace. Twenty-four times in the Abrahamic covenant, God says, "I will."
2. Verse 7a: The *people* of the covenant.
3. Verses 7b & 8a: The *period* of the covenant. It is everlasting. Ezekiel 11:17: "Therefore say, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "I will gather you from the peoples, assemble you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel."'"
4. Verse 8b: The *place* of the covenant.

In verse 9, God pivots from all the blessings of His efforts in His covenant with Abraham and his seed to Abraham's response as an outward expression of his belief in God's covenant. Starting with Abraham himself and for every male seed (by birth or bought with money) thereafter, they must be circumcised. Courson puts this practice in its proper perspective, "*The sign of the covenant would manifest itself in the flesh. That is, there was to be a sensitivity and purity in them that they hadn't known previously. Circumcision was an outward sign, but it would speak of an inward reality, the same way the ordinances of Baptism and Communion do presently.*" McGee adds, "*You do not perform good works in order to be saved; you perform good works because you have been saved.*" If your motivation for your works is the latter, then your energy to persist in those works will be longer as you are operating from a place of gratitude.

In verse 15, God changes Sarai's name to "Sarah." He confirms it will be *her* that will provide the true child of promise. Abraham is 99 when hearing this, and he laughs – not out of a lack of faith but out of joy. Abraham, showing love for Ishmael, asks the Lord, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" The order of the Lord's responses in verses 19-21 are important. In verse 19, He initially sidesteps Abraham's request regarding Ishmael and confirms Sarah is going to give birth to Isaac, and His everlasting covenant will be through his descendants. In verse 18, the Lord shows His grace and forgiveness to Abraham and promises great fruitfulness to Ishmael and his descendants. However, in verse 19 he reconfirms His covenant will only be with Isaac. Abraham showed his obedience to the circumcision command. Himself,

Ishmael, and every male in Abraham's household was circumcised. Abraham was indeed a man of faith, but He was also a man who practiced what He believed.

In chapter 18, we have the sixth appearance of the Lord to Abraham. He's accompanied by unnamed two men. Abraham was a gracious man, and he offers the men to wash their feet, to rest under one of his trees, and to feed them. The Lord confirms that Sarah will have a son in the following year – she is now 89 years old. She also laughs to herself, which the Lord hears. There are no secrets with the Lord – He knows everything. Sarah lied about laughing when asked by the Lord why did she laugh, but the Lord confirmed with her He knew the truth.

The balance of chapter 18 has the Lord informing Abraham that the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin is so grievous. In this world we're living in today – a world that is devolving into a hotbed of immorality – God is hearing our cries for deliverance. Just as God judged Sodom and Gomorrah, so will He judge this world, which is, in my opinion, likely way worse. Abraham picks up on the Lord's intent to destroy the cities, and he, being a loving uncle to Lot and his family, pleads for God's mercy on the righteous. They go back and forth in a "if so many people are righteous are around, will you judge them?" discussion. In each exchange, Abraham lowers the number God will have mercy on the righteous, and in every case, the Lord confirms He will not harm the righteous.

I believe we are at the end of the end times – there are too many obvious present examples of what the world is to be like, according to Scripture, in the end times. I'm a proponent of the pre-tribulation rapture scenario. While that scenario has some biblical holes in it, there are fewer holes in that one than the alternative scenarios. I believe, this discussion that is in chapter 18 is one of the most compelling and foundational arguments for the pre-tribulation rapture scenario. As we have noted earlier, Abraham was declared righteousness by his faith in the promised seed of his descendants that would include Jesus Christ. By our faith in Jesus, we become joint heirs of Christ's righteousness. Therefore, if God would not judge the righteous in Abraham's day, and God does not change, I believe we can count on Him being merciful to us and rapturing us before His judgment on a Christ-rejecting world.

We have covered in this lesson things that Abraham got right and things that he got wrong. While we see to this very day the consequences of what Abram got wrong via the even more relevant than ever tensions in the Middle East, he is still viewed as a friend of God and the father of faith in the Scriptures. Ohhhhhh, the grace of God. The faithfulness of God. The mercy of God. The immutability, or unchanging nature, of God. We're going to have good days and bad days of faith. We're going to get it right sometimes, and we're going to get it wrong other times. God loves us just the same. He made the covenant, and He can't deny Himself. No greater demonstration of that unwavering faithfulness of His love is found at the cross. You were bought with the precious righteous blood of Christ, and by your faith in Him, you are declared not guilty – you are declared righteous in God's eyes. The homework asks a provocative question, "What helps you remember you belong to God?" Let's stand and sing one of my favorite ways to remember I belong to God – through worship and praise.