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God's Covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:7-21)

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04/06/2014

If I asked you, "What is the greatest problem that our society is facing at the present time? What is the root source of all our difficulties as a nation? Why are so many people dropping out of church life? Why are entire denominations falling into apostasy, and denying not only the gospel, but even the fundamental moral teachings of Scripture? How is it that we have reached a point in our nation's history in which people are now calling what is good, evil, and what is evil, good? Why are we disintegrating so very rapidly from a cultural, political, religious, moral and economic standpoint? If you could sum up in a single word the basic reason for our decline, what would it be? Without a doubt, I would choose the word "unbelief". Unbelief is the root source of all our woes. Multitudes in our nation no longer believe the fundamental teachings of Scripture. They do not believe that the Bible is God's inspired Word. They do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God. They do not believe that He was born of the virgin Mary, that He performed miracles, that He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried, or that He arose from the grave on the third day and ascended to heaven as Ruler over all. They do not believe that He is coming back to judge the living and the dead, or that He will usher into eternal glory those who believe and condemn the faithless to hell. They do not believe that Christ is the only way to the Father, or that faith in Him is essential for salvation. Although all of these truths are taught plainly in the Bible, it is obvious that multitudes do not believe them, or we would not be where we are as a nation. Without any doubt, unbelief has destroyed America.

Now, in many ways, we may still be a religious nation; but there is huge difference between being religious and having faith. Many people want to be religious, because it makes them feel good about themselves. They perform good works hoping thereby to appease their conscience and to earn God's favor. But their lack of faith is seen in their complete unwillingness to believe with unwavering faith the truth of those things to which God has affirmed in the Scriptures. Religious unbelievers may go so far as to say that the Bible's teachings are 'possibly' true, but they refuse to regard them as 'most assuredly' true-- and that shows a deeply ingrained spirit of skepticism and unbelief in their hearts. For as Thomas Browne has rightly observed, "To believe only possibilities is not faith but philosophy."

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A man truly believes God only when he is willing to submit his own fallible judgment to God's infallible judgment. That was Abraham's response when God told him to look up into the night sky and count the stars, then said to him, "So shall your descendants be." In response to God's clear affirmation, we read, "And he believed the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." As I said last week, the statement "he believed the Lord" is literally, "He said 'amen' to the Lord." In other words, Abraham did not vacillate in his response to God's Word by saying, "You know, God, I grant that what you are saying is possible." No! He latched onto God's words with his whole heart and believed the certainty of what He had said. As a drowning man clings to a lifesaver that someone throws him from the shore, so Abraham clung to the truth of God's words and refused to let go of them, because he knew that God could be trusted.

We ought not to think that Abraham took a blind leap in the dark, however. On the contrary, his faith was a reasonable response to the evidence of God's infinite power right before His very eyes. He exercised faith, not against all the evidence, but in light of the evidence that God gave him. God pointed to His own handiwork in the heavens. He overwhelmed Abraham with the visible proof of His power, and in that context, He called him to exercise faith. So Abraham's faith was not an irrational leap; it was a reasonable response to sufficient evidence. But it was a response of faith because it involved believing in that which was not visible to sight.

This is always true of faith. On the one hand, biblical faith is always grounded on evidence. "Faith must have adequate evidence," says A. A. Hodge, "else it is mere superstition." On the other hand, faith is not mere rationalism, for it always involves laying hold of realities that are hidden from our sight and that transcend our full understanding. As John Baillie puts it, "Faith does not mean believing without evidence. It means believing in realities that go beyond sense and sight-- for which a totally different sort of evidence is required."

The evidence-based nature of faith is made clear from the passage that we are studying this morning; for you will notice that twice in this passage, Abraham asks God to provide him with evidence that will strengthen his faith; and God responds, not by rebuking him for his presumption, but by granting him the very thing he was seeking.

Abraham's first request is found in verse 2, where he says, "Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer

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of Damascus?" By saying, "What will you give me?" Abraham was not denying that God had already given him a promise. Neither was he denying the trustworthiness of God's promise. Rather, he was simply confessing to God his intellectual confusion in light of present circumstances. He was now 85 and was still without an heir. His wife's continuing barrenness and his own increasing age were making him wonder if he had understood God's promise correctly. By saying, "What will you give me?" Abraham was saying to God, in essence, "Lord, I fear that I have misunderstood your word. Will you please give me some confirming proof that I have grasped your word correctly and that there is no deficiency in my understanding??"

What we see in this request is not rebellious unbelief, but rather, faith seeking understanding-- faith admitting its own weakness and fallibility. God was obviously pleased with Abraham's confession, because he gave to Abraham the very thing he was longing for, by displaying to his wondering eyes the countless stars of heaven, and reminding Abraham of his infinite power. "Here is what you are forgetting Abraham," He told him in essence. "Here is the missing piece of the puzzle that will make sense of everything I have told you-- my infinite creative power as God. Do you see it now? There up in the heavens, Abraham, is the evidence you crave that confirms my promise." With gratitude, Abraham received this corroborating proof God gave him, and believed the promise of God with his whole heart.

However, that was not the only request Abraham made of God in this chapter; for you will notice that just two verses down making a second request, when the Lord reminded him of His promise concerning the land. God had already promised Abraham that He would give him and his descendants all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession; and in verse 7 of this chapter He repeated that promise: "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees to give you this land to inherit it." Once again, however, Abraham felt the weakness of his own faith, and he asked God for further proof that would confirm the certainty of God's promise: "Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?"

Once again, God did not rebuke Abraham for unbelief, because He understood that Abraham was crying out to Him for a stronger faith. Abraham was saying, "Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief!" Abraham was recognizing God as the Author of faith, and so was going to Him and saying, "Lord, since you are the Giver of faith, is there anything that you could give me to strengthen my faith, for it is weak." Abraham was not casting doubt on God's trustworthiness,

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but confessing his own human weakness. He was saying to God, in essence, "Lord, I am a frail creature of dust who struggles to walk by faith, rather than by sight. I believe your word, but my earthly circumstances seem to contradict your promises, so I crave to have a greater measure of assurance that your promises are true. You tell me that I will inherit all the land of Canaan some day; but so far, I have no place here to call my own. I live a nomadic life dwelling in tents and tending my flocks. Is there anything you can give me that will increase my assurance of your promise?"

Do you see that Abraham's attitude was not that of an unbeliever, but of a believer who senses his weakness and longs to grow in his faith. Because growth in faith involves two things-- growth in understanding, and growth in trust-- that is just what Abraham asked of God. He wanted God to give him a better understanding of how His promises would be fulfilled, and a deeper conviction concerning the certainty of their fulfillment-- so he went directly to God for these blessings. His attitude was not that of an unbeliever, but of a believer-- because he recognized that God, as the Author of faith, was the only One who could increase his faith.

Is it not encouraging to know that we can go to God in our weakness, and in our doubts, and in our confusion, and say to Him without pretense, "Lord, I am struggling to believe. My faith is weak, Lord; I have doubts; and I am confused." Will you please do something, Lord, will you please give me something, to increase my faith!" Oh, dear child of God, do you realize that may approach the Lord in that way, honestly, humbly, confessing to him your weakness, and crying out to Him for strength? That is how the Lord wants us to approach him-- with childlike humility and confidence that He will minister to our need and respond to our cry when we are confused and hurt and suffering. There is nothing that we need to hide from him-- no facade we need to wear. We can be totally honest with him about where we are spiritually, because He cares for us deeply and has promised to shower His mercy on those who approach him in this way.

Abraham's first request was for a greater understanding of God's promise; and God answered that request, on the one hand, by revealing more of His divine plan to Abraham, and appealing to His divine power as God. Now, in response to Abraham's second request for deeper trust, God sealed his promise to Abraham by effecting a blood covenant with him. That is what we read about in the closing verses of this chapter.

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The ceremonial act described here may strike us as unusual, but it is was familiar to Abraham, for it was not uncommon in that day for parties who were making an alliance with each other to do so by means of a covenant-making ceremony like the one we see described here.

In that day, when two people wanted to make an important agreement with each other, they would formalize their agreement by means of a binding oath that was sealed in blood. They wouldn't simply shake hands or sign a document, as we do today when making a binding contract with another person. They would seal the agreement by the shedding of blood. The way it would work was like this. They would take one or more sacrificial animals and cut their bodies in two. Then, they would place the half carcasses on the ground facing each other in such a way as to form a sort of corridor. Then, they would walk together through this corridor to seal the oath. In this way, the two parties in the agreement were essentially pledging their own lives as a bond. By walking together between the slain animals, each party was saying to the other, "The promises I have made are so sure, let me be torn in pieces like these animals if I prove unfaithful to keep them. May my life forfeited if I fail to fulfill all that I have promised to do."

It is this element of bloodshed that distinguishes ancient covenants from modern-day contracts. That is why someone has defined a covenant as a "bond in blood"-- and that is a good definition. There is a difference, however, between a divine covenant that God makes with men and a human covenant that men make with each other. In human covenants, the two parties of the covenant approach each other as equals. They sit down and negotiate the terms of the covenant, and when they reach an agreement, they seal it in blood by a taking a mutual oath that places each party under a curse for breaking his part of the agreement; and if either party violates the terms of the covenant, it is broken. By contrast, in divine covenants, God is the sovereign Lord who always initiates the covenant. He is the sole Author of the terms of the covenant. He does not sit down at a bargaining table and negotiate the terms of the covenant with men. Finally, He is the one who ratifies the covenant, putting it into effect by His own sovereign action. That is what we see God doing here with Abraham-- He makes a solemn covenant with him, in order to give him the added assurance he seeks that God's promise to him will most certainly be fulfilled.

Let's consider now how God put His covenant with Abraham into effect. First, God gave Abraham an assignment to carry out. Then, God caused Abraham to fall into a deep sleep; and while he lay there passively, God did something

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very mysterious and very wonderful. He sealed His promise to Abraham all by Himself, making it perfectly clear that the fulfillment of the promise depended on God alone. So let's take a closer look at what Abraham did, and what God did, in the establishing of this covenant, and the meaning of all this for us in the present day.

A. What Abraham Did-- First of all, at God's command, Abraham brought before the Lord several animals for sacrifice; a three year old heifer, a three year old female goat, a three-year old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. In accordance with established custom, Abraham slew these animals, cut them in two, and placed the half carcasses in two rows, with each piece opposite to its corresponding piece. In this way, Abraham made the traditional 'corridor of blood' that the parties in a covenant ceremony would walk through together. He did not cut the birds in two, however-- perhaps because of their small size.

Then something unusual happened. All of the sudden, vultures swooped down from the sky in order to feed on the bleeding carcasses, but Abraham drove them away.

Now let's stop to consider the significance of all this. God was about to reveal to Abraham the future of his physical descendants, the children of Israel. He was about to tell him about the suffering that his descendants would have to endure before they could enter the Promised Land to take possession of it. As a prelude to that revelation, Abraham was told to slay these animals, and then the carcasses of the animals were attacked by vultures. Why was that significant?

Well, the specific animals that Abraham was told to slay would later be considered "clean" animals under the Law of Moses. In fact, they would be the very animals that God ordained to be offered in the place of the children of Israel. So those animals that Abraham gathered together represented the Israelites. By contrast, the vultures that swooped down on those animals would be considered "unclean" under the Law of Moses; so they appear to represent the unclean Gentiles that would afflict the Jews during their four hundred years in captivity. What we see taking place, therefore, is a symbolic picture of the suffering that Israel would endure in the future, and God's deliverance of them from their oppressors. By defending the dead carcasses of clean animals from the vultures, Abraham was foreshadowing the action of God, who would deliver the children of Israel from the unclean Gentiles who would try to exterminate

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them. (Interestingly, the god Horus whom the Egyptians worshipped was a falcon, a bird of prey.)

After Abraham drove away the vultures, it was time for God to step in and finish the covenant-making ceremony all by himself. So what did He do?

B. What God Did--The first thing God did was put Abraham into a deep sleep, so that he would lie in a completely passive state while God ratified the covenant. We read in verse 12, "Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram." This scene reminds me of what happened when God determined to bless Adam with a wife. We read in Genesis 2:21, "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man he made into a woman, and He brought her to the man." Isn't it interesting how God did the same thing for Adam and Abraham before bestowing on them an extraordinary gift of grace-- He put them both in a deep sleep! Why so? I think it was to show that man does absolutely nothing to earn by his meritorious deeds the greatest of God's gifts-- they are blessings that flow from God's sovereign grace alone, without regard to man's own works. Man can do nothing but passively receive these blessings from the Lord. So Abraham, throughout the whole time that God was putting into effect the covenant, could do nothing but lie motionless as God acted to secure the blessings of grace for him and His seed. God had already promised these blessings, but now His promise was sealed in blood.

Abraham was like one of those patients you hear about who experience anesthesia awareness during surgery. Anesthesia awareness is phenomenon that occurs on rare occasions during surgery when a patient has not been given enough anesthetic to render him completely unconscious. Although he cannot move or even twitch muscle, he is fully aware of everything going on, and feels ever slice of the scalpel, and even puncture of the needle sowing him up. Something like that was happening to Abraham. He could not move or twitch a muscle, but he could see everything that God was doing and hear every word that He was speaking.

Not only that, he was keenly aware of his own emotions, for we read that as Abraham was lying there, "behold, horror and darkness fell upon him." Imagine how you would feel if you woke up in a coffin and realized that you had been buried alive; you will feel a sense of great horror and darkness, wouldn't you? Well, Abraham felt something like that-- a sense of terrible dread

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and anxiety that was unbearable. He wanted to get away from there, to run as far away he could, but he couldn't move. What was the source of his terror? Some commentators point to the fact that God's people are often overwhelmed by fear when they come into the presence of God. So it may have been the presence of God passing over Abraham that made him so afraid and filled with awe. On the other hand, it could be that Abraham at that moment was feeling the sense of the dreadful bondage that his descendants would later feel during their captivity in Egypt, for God in the book of Deuteronomy compares the experience of Israel in Egypt to being in an "iron furnace" (Deuteronomy Deut. 4:20). In that case, God was causing Abraham to experience something of the afflictions that his descendants would experience, so that he could identify with them more fully. Since they had first to be in horror and darkness in Egypt before entering into the joy of their inheritance, so Abraham had to experience the foretaste of their sufferings, before he could share in the foresight of their happiness.

That interpretation of verse 12 is confirmed, I believe, by what follows. For immediately after a sense of "horror and great darkness" descend on Abraham, God tells him of the afflictions his descendants would experience in Egypt: "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." God speaks to Abraham here in round numbers, for the children of Israel would actually spend 430 years in Egypt; but the point that God was driving home to Abraham was that the fulfillment of His promise would not occur for many years-- four centuries, in fact. Abraham would not live to see God's promise fulfilled, for God tells him "you shall go to your fathers in peace, and be buried at a good old age." So what Abraham needed to understand was that God's promise was certain, but its fulfillment was not imminent. Many things had to happen before his descendants could take possession of the land. Therefore, Abraham must not be troubled by the lack of empirical evidence confirming God's promise. He must not keep looking around for some type of tangible or visible proof that God's word concerning the land would be fulfilled. His faith had to be grounded on higher evidence than the evidence of his eyes-- it had to be grounded in the trustworthy character-- His perfect knowledge of all things and His inability to lie. Abraham had to remember, as John Baillie says, that faith "means believing in realities that go beyond sense and sight-- for which a totally different sort of evidence is required."

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A "totally different sort of evidence" is what God proceeded to give Abraham, by coming to down to Abraham in a heavenly vision. This vision, described in verse 17, is what is commonly called a "theophany." A theophany is as a visible manifestation or appearance of God. We see theophanies throughout the Old and New Testament. God appeared to Moses as fire in burning bush. He appeared to the children of Israel in the wilderness in the pillar of cloud that led them by day, and the pillar of fire that led them by night. He appeared to the prophet Isaiah as a king on his throne: "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple." He appeared in the form of a dove descending at the baptism of Jesus. These were all theophanies. But the theophany recorded here is one of the most awe-inspiring and mysterious in Scripture. For as the sun went down and it became dark, we read that "there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces." What an eerie and awe-inspiring sight that must have been! Imagine seeing a miniature furnace appear in the dark of the night, hovering just above the ground and spewing out smoke. Then alongside it a flaming torch. This was the form in which God appeared to Abraham, to show forth the burning holiness of His nature, and the illuminating character of His truth. In the Scriptures, we are told that God is both a "consuming fire" and "the light of the world." As a consuming fire, His holy nature judges all that is unrighteous and impure. As the light of the world, His truth illumines the darkness of this sinful world and dispels the lies of Satan. This is how God appeared Abraham. Then, as Abraham lay there in a semi-comatose state, the oven and the torch began to move between the carcasses of the dead animals. Abraham could do nothing but watch in paralyzed awe as these two objects traversed the "corridor of blood" in solemn procession, sending off waves of heat and shining brightly in the dark Palestinian night. As those two objects moved, the voice of God repeated to Abraham the same promise he had heard before, but this time, God gave more detail, spelling out the exact borders of the land He was giving to Abraham: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates-- the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."

Here was the confirmation that Abraham longed for, that would set his heart at rest-- God had not only made promises to him, He had sealed those promises in blood. By passing alone through the slain pieces of the animals alone, God was letting Abraham know that the fulfillment of the promise depended on His divine power and grace alone. He was saying to Abraham, in

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essence, "May I be torn apart like the bodies of these beasts, may my very life as God be snuffed out completely, if I fail to fulfill these promises to you!" What greater assurance could Abraham desire? God laid His own life on the line in declaring the absolute certainty of His promises. He put up as bond, not only His integrity as God, but His own existence as God. Abraham and his descendants could do nothing but receive these blessings, for they were assured by the grace of God.

In every way, this covenant highlighted the gracious character of God. It even highlighted His kindness toward the pagan peoples of Canaan, for the very fact God was not yet ready to give Abraham and his seed the land was because, as He said in verse 16, "the iniquity of the Amorite" was "not yet complete." What did that mean? Well, it meant that God had appointed a certain time limit for demonstrating patience with the Amorites, and that time limit had not yet been reached. Why? Because God is "slow to wrath." He is patient with the very worst of sinners, and that is why he permits them to continue sinning on earth for so long a time, because He is reluctant to condemn the children of men. He delights to show mercy, and judgment is a strange work of His. It is a necessary work, but it is a work that God is slow to undertake. In that we see His goodness. In that we see that His desire is to save, not destroy.

Now, God knew perfectly well that Amorites would not repent, no matter how much time He gave them to do so. Despite all the privileges they enjoyed, they would never repent of their idolatry. Yet God had resolved to hold off on judging them for another four centuries, in order to show forth His character as a God who longsuffering and patient. That is why Abraham's seed would have to wait to inherit the Promised Land; because the Amorites had not yet filled up the measure of their sins. They had not yet sinned past the point of no return. Only when that point was reached, would God judge them, by unleashing the Israelites upon them as His executioners.

CONCLUSION

The message of this passage for Abraham and for us is very clear. We can never earn the inheritance of God by any works of our own; we can only receive it as a gift of grace. Moreover, the way we receive God's inheritance is by trusting with our whole hearts in the promises that God has made to His people, promises that have been sealed in blood. That was true regarding the inheritance of Canaan, and it is true regarding the inheritance of heaven, as well.

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Heaven is a gift of grace; it not something we can earn by our works, any more than Abraham could have earned a title to the land of Canaan by his works. That land was given to him and to his descendants freely as a gift; and so is the heavenly Canaan to which we are headed. In the covenant that God made with Abraham, says John Jeske, Abraham "promised nothing, did nothing, said nothing. He merely observed what the Lord was doing, he heard what the Lord was saying, and he believed." In like manner, we inherit the gift of eternal life, not by working, but by hearing and believing the word of the gospel. As the apostle Paul put it many years later, "It is by grace you have been saved through faith-- and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works , so that no man can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9).

When it comes to the inheritance of heaven, we are just like Abraham lying paralyzed on the ground, unable to move a single muscle. We cannot perform a single work to gain the favor of God or to carve out for ourselves a path to heaven. But Christ has come; he has appeared in this world suddenly and gloriously like that smoking oven and blazing torch that appeared in the dark Palestinian night, and by His own deeds and His own sufferings on the cross, He has done everything necessary to purchase for all who believe peace with God and eternal glory. How do peace and heaven become ours? What must we do to earn them? The answer is, nothing! There is nothing we can do, for hear me once again, loud and clear-- Christ has done it all! He entered alone into the sufferings of Gethsemane, with no one to share in His grief; He faced His accusers alone when He stood before the Sanhedrin, and later before Pilate in the Roman Praetorium. He bore the weight of the cross alone, without anyone to share in His pain. He endured the wrath of God alone, when He was forsaken not only by men, but by His Father in heaven. On Calvary, Jesus walked the "corridor of blood" alone and bore the curse of God that was typified by the slain animals of Genesis 15. And having born that curse, He then burst the bonds of death alone, to open the way into God's very presence for all who believe.

Have you trusted in this Savior? There is no other way to receive the gift of forgiveness and peace with God. "We are forgiven simply because the sinless Savior died," says Geoff Thomas, "There is no other reason why God should pardon us. He entered the hellish judgment for us that we might enter heaven's glory through Him. That is the grace of God in Jesus Christ and salvation consists in taking it."

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Have you taken God's gift of salvation by taking hold of Christ? Look to Him and receive from Him the free gift of eternal life, by trusting in Him alone. Amen.