

First Sermon: November 23rd

Slide #1: Title, “The Heavenward Tie”, Text, Genesis 15:1-21

Slide #2: Genesis 15:1, “*Fear not, Abram...*”

What does Abram fear?

He has no heir.

Do we understand his complaint?

Question 1: Fear is pervasive. What are some of the fears which trouble you and how do you relate or connect these with your faith?

Slide #3: The preference for no children: The richer a society, the fewer children it produces

Raising children is costly

Educational expectations

New interests and activities

The cost in time

Slide #4: Everyone has a right to be free to care for and about no one other than ourselves!

But nothing is as demanding or as limiting of personal freedom in many ways as raising children

So who needs them?

Question 2: In your estimation, what are the greatest challenges/difficulties/hazards in raising children and what are the greatest rewards/joys/gratifications?

Question 3: What do you think plays the largest role in persuading husbands and wives to have few or even no children?

Slide #5: God’s promise to Abram was only a little about Abram, a lot about the generations to follow: Genesis 12:1-2. It is when they become a great nation, many generations in the future.

The covenant people of God and carriers of the promise of the triumph over the serpent

Question 4: What sort of “future orientation” is there in the Christian life? How effective is this in helping people to live for “more than the moment”?

Slide #6: A secondary theme: adoption

Galatians 4:4-6

Romans 8:14-15

In the Law a sojourner or stranger could become an Israelite by circumcision

Slide #7: Aspects or stages in God’s covenant with Abram

1. The promise of a son of his bloodline
2. Circumcision as the sign of the covenant
3. Oath of confirmation: Genesis 22:16-19 and Hebrews 6:13-17

Question 5: Is there in your life a particular issue, perhaps an unanswered prayer or a broken relationship or a lost dream, which comes up repeatedly as a doubt maker regarding your faith or trust in God?

Slide #8: Abram is learning to live by faith.

Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6, James 2:23

“Romans 4 presents faith not as a crowning merit but as a readiness to accept what God promises.”

Slide #9: John 6:28-29, *“Then they said to him, ‘What must we do, to be doing the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’”*

Question 6: How would you tell someone what it means to “believe in Jesus” and how this works out in practical terms?

Slide #10: The difference between a simple promise & a covenant relates to men and not to God.

“O Lord God, how am I to know I shall possess it?”

Like the question Mary asked Gabriel

Genesis 15:9-10 and 17

Slide #11: A suzerainty treaty as between a (conquering) king and his subjects:

Protective rule

Obedient trust

Severing symbolized what happens if either party fails the terms

Slide #12: God answers Abram’s uncertainty: Genesis 15:13-14

Question 7: What is the difference between a simple promise and a covenant?

Slide #13: What of the Amorites?

1. Their iniquity is not yet complete
2. They will be removed
3. In the meantime enjoy peace

Question 8: Do you see God as being fair or just in His handling of the Amorites?

Slide #14: Genesis 15:17, the covenant made. It is God alone who passes between the severed pieces and takes full responsibility

“...this, rather than Sinai’s, was the fundamental covenant, & it spoke of grace & not law (Galatians 3:17-22).”

Purpose of the Law: Gal. 3:21-29

Question 9: How is the covenant God made in Genesis 15 like the New Covenant which is in Christ’s blood?

The title for today is “The Heavenward Tie.” You might recall that last week we looked at chapter 14 [of Genesis], and chapter 14 talked about the earthly ties. This week [we look at] the heavenward tie. Last week we looked at the remarkable capturing by Abraham of Lot and all of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah after the five kings that held them in bondage came and took captive the cities and hauled them off. Abram took his men along with some allies amongst the Amorites and rescued Lot.

Today we are looking at chapter 15 [of Genesis]. This is the heavenward tie. There are a couple of questions that Abram put to God and God answers in this chapter. Join me as I read right straight through beginning at verse 1.

(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.’ (15:2) 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?’ (15:3) And Abram said, ‘Behold you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.’ (15:4) 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.’ (15:5) 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.’ (15:6) And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

(15:7) 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.’ (15:8) But he said, ‘O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?’ (15:9) 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.’ (15:10) 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. (15:11) And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

(15:12) As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. (15:13) 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. (15:14) But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. (15:15) As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. (15:16) And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.’

(15:17) When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. (15:18) 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, (15:19) the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, (15:20) the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, (15:21) the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.’”

We do not know how much time has passed between the events in Genesis 14 and Abram’s encounter with God as recorded in Genesis 15. It could have been days, it could have been weeks, it could have been years. It is important to remember that between the time when Abram left Haran and arrived in Canaan and then had a son is twenty five years. So there is a lot of time between these two signal events and we do not know where we are on that time-line. Possibly Abram has had a crisis of faith. How many of us have been engaged in some intense kind of project or ministry and you succeed, and then after you have exceeded you [have a kind of let down]? Well sometimes in the aftermath of that tremendous output of energy and hope and prayer and focus can actually be [a] falling all the way into depression and uncertainty. You are not certain where you stand [with the Lord]. So perhaps that is what happened to Abram after he has expended a huge amount of energy and resources to take his men and go all the

way north of Damascus, defeat the armies of five kings and come back again. Perhaps he is feeling [depleted]. In any case it ties in to his uncertainties.

The Lord comes, we see, to Abram with a word of comfort. That word of comfort we find in Genesis 15:1, “*Fear not Abram, for I am your shield and your reward will be very great.*” Now a logical question that would come to our mind would be, “What does Abram fear? He has just successfully defeated five armies. He has pulled off a remarkable feat, and he has been blessed by Melchizedek, he has returned all the possession and people of Sodom and Gomorrah and said he wants nothing to do with them. He is independent, he is strong, he is successful: what does he fear?” Abram tells us what he fears and he tells us twice. We know that in scripture the way in which something is emphasized as being really important is by way of repetition, so the fact that Abram says the same thing to God twice is highly significant for our appreciating how important it was to him. Notice what he says. In verses two and three he says, I have no heir. “*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?’ And Abram said, ‘Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.’*”

I reflected on this and I thought, “I wonder how well we understand Abram’s complaint?” One of the things that you and I face constantly is that we do not live in the same time or place as Abraham. We live today. We live in the midst of a culture that is profoundly different than that in which Abram lived. Not only is it profoundly different than the one in which Abram lived, but our culture is already profoundly different than the culture in which Toni Edwards [who just passed away] was born and grew up and [also] many of us in this room. In fact I think it would be very interesting if sometime we could figure out a way of putting together a sort of survey to see how well aware all of us in this room are of the profundity of the shift in our culture in its values and perception of what is true, what is good and what is right. Sometimes I think when our missionaries come home from overseas, we have been told and I have had affirmation that coming home to the United States can almost be a greater shock culturally than going abroad. We, of course, move day by day and simply breathe the air that is around us. So how well do we understand Abram’s complaint?

On the one hand there is the widespread trend for people, even married couples in our culture to prefer to have no children at all. God said, when He created man, be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth, a command that has never been rescinded. The statistical facts are irrefutable. Across the board the richer a society the fewer the children it produces. The cause for this is no doubt complex. Of major importance is the rapidly escalating cost of raising a child. Curiously this is almost equally true in non-industrial, pre-industrial societies as it is in societies with sophisticated technology. Wealth not only raises the educational expectation, and therefore the cost of people for their children, but it also presents possibilities for all manner of interests and activities, both for those children and for the adults. It is not simply the monetary cost of children that rise, but it is also the relative cost in time. There are so many things to do which having children gets in the way of! At the root of much of the insistent cry in our culture that everyone has a right to be free is simply the insistence that we all have the freedom to care about ourselves and no one else. It is a simple truth that almost nothing is as demanding, as burdensome, as limiting to personal freedom as raising child. So there are vast numbers of people in our culture who say, who needs them?

Beloved, I think that it is necessary for us to have the courage and the honesty to recognize there is a very short distance between this sort of feeling and the acceptance of abortion. The issue is one that not only values life, but it is also an understanding that every child created not only bears the image of God, but is His creation! So I wonder how well we understand the deep and intense longing of a man like Abram for a child.

I have known a number of childless couples, and I have known how deeply they long for that child. But I have known other couples as well.

Abram wants a child. He does so for reasons that actually should speak to us. God’s promise, you might recall, was that He was going to give Abram a child, but the child and the giving of that gift was only a little bit about Abram’s own life, and it was a lot about the generations to follow. This what He said in Genesis 12:1-2. *“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing.’”* We have already seen a little of how that will work as Abram pulls together his men and allies and rescues Lot and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and is then blessed by Melchizedek. This is all in chapter 14. Abram is already building a remarkable reputation about himself as a man that he is leaving to his children, at least if he ever gets one.

There was a time, and that time was not so long ago in our own culture, when individuals, people highly prized their family’s honor. The name which the Lord promises to make great reaches its true or real greatness not in Abram’s life, but in the life of his children and his children’s children as they become, as God said, a great nation. This is the work of many generations. The name, of course, refers to the defining qualities of those future generations which are passed on because they are prized, they are held in honor, their ethical code and moral behavior and self-understanding of themselves as the covenant people of God and the heirs or carries of the promise of God of humanity’s eventual triumph over the serpent.

I don’t know about you, but I know that in the raising of our children we wanted them to have a very high appreciation of the fact that they were Bronsons. They were Bronsons that had a certain input, a certain stamp of character, purpose and drive. A certain attitude toward society at large and how they would orient to it, how they would in fact bless it as those who had received tremendous riches of God’s grace because mom and dad were believers in Jesus Christ and had received the living Word and desired that that word would pass on to our children and their children and their children’s children until the Lord will return.

The anticipation for Abram was that [his children] would carry the name of the Lord forward from generation to generation until the Lord Himself brings about that new order of things when the serpent is crushed and the serpent is removed from the earth. For Abram, you see, believing this way, looking to God this was, it was essential that he have an heir.

If you are familiar with the Testaments, both Old and New, which I think you are; I don’t think I am preaching anything new (heeding John Piper’s warning [read earlier in the service], you know that there is a profound change that occurs between the two testaments. As is obvious from Abram’s complaint to God, he wants an heir of his own bloodline. I am quite sure Abram had nothing against Eliezer of Damascus who was the servant of [Abram’s] household. In fact the fact that [Abram] was going to give him everything he had says he trusted him a great deal and valued him highly. But in Abram’s thinking Eliezer could not be a true heir. He wants one from his own bloodline. Eliezer would have agreed along with the whole sweep of the Old Testament. We see this priority in the care they took to trace their family line from generation to generation. But if you read the Old Testament carefully you can see that there is in fact a secondary theme of great importance, and that is adoption. Down through the centuries there are individuals and families adopted into the tribes of Israel. A minor theme in the Old Testament, this becomes a major theme in the New. To the Galatians Paul writes in Galatians 4:4-6, *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has spent His Spirit into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba, Father!’”* How precious is that truth! I appreciated Rob Rodney as he was preparing for worshipping the Lord in giving our offering saying, “Lord it is so good that You call us children.” We are children by Your grace. That means that we are the adopted children of God. It is a chosen and precious relationship. To the Romans Paul wrote virtually the same thing in Romans 8:14-15. *“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons*

of God. You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba!, Father!’”

The Old Testament law makes some sort of a provision for adoption into the covenant people. A sojourner or a stranger could actually become an Israelite by being circumcised. Significantly it was Moses’ wife Zipporah who in one of the more obscure passages of scripture make the connection In Exodus 4:24-26 we read, *“At a lodging place on the way [to Egypt] the Lord met [Moses] and sought to put him to death. [Why? It was because he had not circumcised his sons.] Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her sons’ foreskin and touched Moses’ feet with it and said, ‘Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!’ So [the Lord] let [Moses] alone. It was then that she said, ‘A bridegroom of blood,’ because of the circumcision.”* Circumcision became the sign of the covenant between God and His chosen people. It is not actually prescribed until you come to Genesis 17. As such it is the second stage in the aspects of God’s covenant with Abram. That is what we are looking at in chapter 15, this covenant that God establishes with Abram. The first of the signs is the promise of a son to be of Abram’s own bloodline. The second is circumcision, which will come up in the 17th chapter of Genesis. The last is the confirming oath given by God. You find that in chapter 22:16-19 and it is repeated in Hebrews 6:13-17. I am going to read that section. Listen to what it says.

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, ‘Surely I will bless you and multiply you.’ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath. . . .”

Remember that as we go through this series of studies we are watching a man learning how to walk or live by faith. Abram is learning to live by faith. When God called Abram he had promised that Abram would become a great nation, a blessed nation through which all the families of the earth would be blessed. In the absence of a son, Abram probably grew doubtful. That is the essence of his fear. Without a son the whole business seems empty. Sometimes I wonder about our families that don’t have children. As you wander off into old age, what are the ties, what are the bonds, what are the relationships, what nurture us, sustains us, gives a hope that carries us over? Well, here is a great opportunity: bring other people to Jesus Christ, and see them adopted into the family of God. Now you begin to build a family that lasts not only for the generations of time upon the face of the earth, but a family that lasts forever. This is the intention of God.

When Abram finally separated from Lot, God reassured him by saying his offspring would be numerous as the dust of the earth. Now in chapter 15 God has Abram gaze at the stars of the heavens and He says, count them if you can; this is the way your future generations will be numbered. You and I both know now that the dust of the earth doesn’t begin to equal the stars of the heavens. There are probably more galaxies out there than there is dust on the face of the earth. Moses tells us that Abram responds with belief. One of the commentators that I like to read, Derek Kidner, helps us to see the overwhelming importance of Genesis 15:6. In Genesis 15:6 we are told, *“And [Abram] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”* This is what Derek Kidner says about it: *“This great statement is quoted twice by Paul, once in Romans 4:3, once in Galatians 3:6, and once by James in 2:23. [It is quoted] to confirm that [our] justification [that is, our right standing with God] has always been by faith. . . this story and the argument of Romans 4 presents faith not as a crowning merit but as a readiness to accept what God promises.”* [It is] a readiness to accept what God promises. True faith is the readiness to accept what God promises is the same as that expressed by Jesus as recorded by John 6:29. Notice what He says in verses 28-29: *“The crowd said to Jesus, ‘What must we do to be doing the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’”* The work of God is to receive Jesus as a gift from the Father. In the anticipation of Christmas, how many of us have received that gift? That is the work of God, to receive the gift!

This chapter is about making a covenant. There is a difference between a simple promise, a word of promise, and a covenant. The difference does not relate to the trustworthiness of God, Who is perfect in faithfulness to His Word. The difference is for us, for we are not perfect and tend to project on others our own fears and weaknesses. God knows this. If you read verses 7-21 in this chapter we encounter fresh uncertainty in Abram. He will have a son, but will he have land. “I will have a child, but will there be a future for my child?” We are the midst of this crisis as a nation. I do not know if you are aware of this or not. Some of us are aware of the statistics that say there is rapidly growing a huge division between those who have growing wealth and those who actually have less. Increasingly our grown children have to live in [their] parents’ homes. Increasingly the kind of work available will not support a family. I believe that we in this particular town and this particular church are protected from much of this, but if you go to our large cities you see increasing numbers of the unemployed, or the half employed, or employed but in work that will not support them. Increasingly we are a society dependent on government largess. This is not the country that was founded, it is not the economy of which we boast. It will not do for us to say it is the evil government taking over everything. Something more profound is wrong. Do our children have hope? Do we have hope for our children?

For Abram the question was, will there be land? He looks around himself and the land which God said [He] was giving to [Abram] is full of people! It is full of Canaanites, Amorites, pagans! It looks doubtful. So he asks this question: “Oh Lord, how am I to know that I am to possess it?” Leupold, another of the commentators, relates this question to the question which Mary asked. You might recall when the angel came to Mary and said, “You are going to have a son.” She had a small problem; no husband! How’s that going to happen? Gabriel told her it would be by the Holy Spirit. So Abram is looking around and says, there is a big problem between me and the fulfillment of the promise. Notice that God does not rebuke Abram. Instead we are told that in Genesis 15:18, “*On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram. . .*” The nature of that covenant is of critical importance. It is described in Genesis 15:9-10 and 17. Listen:

“[God] said to [Abram], ‘Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.’ 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. . . When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.”

What we don’t know Abram certainly would, and that is this is the description of a commonly formed treaty between a king and his conquered subjects. It is called a suzerainty treaty. What this treaty [did] was to establish a relationship between the king and the people he had conquered. This is the relationship: the king said, “I will protect you,” and the people said, “We will obey you.” The severing of the animals indicated what would happen if the terms of the covenant were not kept, whether by the people or the king. Both the king and the subjects represented by one of their own leaders were to pass through those severed animals. God is answering the uncertainty in Abram. Regarding the fulfillment of the promise of the land and the problem of the Canaanites, hear again verses 13-14 in Genesis 15.

“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. They will be afflicted for 400 years, but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve. Afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. They shall come back in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.’”

We now know what Abram did not know, and that is the people will go down to Egypt and be enslaved. Abram has already been assured and has believed that they will be as many as the stars of heaven. Now God says they will return to the land with great possessions. As regards the Amorites, many questions have been raised over time. This is a general name for all the tribes in the area. All God says about them is that their iniquity is not yet complete. How well can we identify with a statement like that? Beloved, we hold the supposition that God is somehow obligated to save everyone. That is not true. God is letting Abram know with absolute clarity He is going to allow the Amorites to pursue and fulfill the full measure of their iniquity. I am always impressed when I read the Narnia

series and am reminded in the course of it that the Lion Aslan is not a tame lion. We tend to make our God into a domesticated cat. We do that by reducing sin to nothing more than small mice that trouble the edge of our lives. The reality is quite different. The reality is that sin devours us and destroys us, devours and destroys our children. There are those people in the world who have given themselves over to sin and they are deadly and they shall be judged, and you and I should agree with that judgment. It is not our task to exercise that judgment. It is left to God. What God says to Abram about the Amorites is simply this: he says they will be removed and Abram’s descendants will then take possession of the land. Meanwhile God says, you My servant will die in peace.

Finally in Genesis 15:17 we see the covenant made. What Moses writes is that, *“When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking firepot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.”* The astounding thing we are told here is by what is not said as much as by what is. What is not said is that Abram passed through the pieces. He did not. We are told he stands off to the side and he watches. What does he watch? He watches the firepot and the flaming torch. That pot and that torch symbolize the presence of God alone passing through the severed pieces. What was told to Abram is that God takes upon Himself the entire responsibility for fulfilling the treaty. Let me ask you a question: was the treaty broken? [It was] over and over and over. You cannot read the Old Testament and fail to understand that Israel disobeyed God again and again and again, and so do we. So who paid the price? Jesus Christ died on the cross, fulfilling the terms of the treaty. God takes upon Himself the whole consequence of our sin. Beloved, have you received the gift? It is the only gift that matters until you have got it. After you have got it the riches of His grace cannot be measured.

Let us pray: Father in heaven teach us, remind us, renew us, empower us, humble us and make us glad; in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application: “The Heavenward Tie”, Genesis 15:1-21, Nov. 23

1. Fear is pervasive. What are some of the fears which trouble you and how do you relate or connect these with your faith?
2. In your estimation, what are the greatest challenges/difficulties/hazards in raising children and what are the greatest rewards/joys/gratifications?
3. What do you think plays the largest role in persuading husbands and wives to have few or even no children?
4. What sort of “future orientation” is there in the Christian life? How effective is this in helping people to live for “more than the moment”?
5. Is there in your life a particular issue, perhaps an unanswered prayer or a broken relationship or a lost dream, which comes up repeatedly as a doubt maker regarding your faith or trust in God?
6. How would you tell someone what it means to “believe in Jesus” and how this works out in practical terms?
7. What is the difference between a simple promise and a covenant?
8. Do you see God as being fair or just in His handling of the Amorites?
9. How is the covenant God made in Genesis 15 like the New Covenant which is in Christ’s blood?