

God's Covenant with Abram: Genesis 15
Ben Reaoch, THREE RIVERS GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH
Sunday morning, August 12, 2007

Our God is a covenant-making God, and He is a covenant-keeping God. He establishes covenants, and He upholds those covenants. He makes promises, and He keeps His promises. God keeps His promises! In the midst of sinking sand, our God is a rock. When nothing else can be trusted, His Word is sure. We may not be able to trust the promises of men, but we can trust the promises of God. God keeps His promises!

Think about the promises that we hear so often in our world. Advertisements make promises in order to sell a product. A certain cereal promises to help you lose weight. A certain medicine promises to cure your ailment. A certain car promises to be fuel-efficient. Politicians make promises that they will make America a better place if they are elected. Right now we're well over a year away from the next presidential election, and candidates are already vying for the allegiance of voters. "Believe my promises," says Hillary Clinton. "No, believe my promises," says Barack Obama. Or Rudy Giuliani or John McCain. Vote for me, and we'll have a better America. These are not promises to rest your life on. As human beings we are so fickle and weak and foolish, that our promises are often hollow and are left unfulfilled.

But contrast the broken promises of humankind to the unbreakable promises of God. When God makes a promise, we can be certain that He will keep that promise. God keeps His promises! This morning we're going to look at Genesis 15, in which God establishes His covenant with Abram. God confirms His promise. Back in chapter 12 God made a great promise to Abram. He said, "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. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." What a promise! And now we come to chapter 15 and Abram is still perplexed by those promises. He wonders how God is going to keep those promises. And here we're going to see how God confirms those promises and establishes an unbreakable covenant with Abram.

The message for us this morning is this: Trust God, for He is trustworthy! Believe His promises, because He will not let you down. He is the only One worthy of our complete trust and devotion. He is the only One who is righteous enough and powerful enough to keep all of His promises. So trust Him. And the other point is that those who trust Him will be counted righteous. Trusting His promises is the only way to be saved. Our works cannot save us. But we must rest in His work to save us.

In verse 1 God comes to Abram in a vision. And He says, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." In the last chapter Abram defeated the armies of the 4 kings and was able to rescue his nephew Lot. And God reminds Abram here that, "I am your shield." God is the one who gave Abram victory. At the end of chapter 14, Abram refuses to accept any of the goods that the king of Sodom offered. He didn't want the king of Sodom to have the opportunity to say, "I have made Abram rich," so Abram accepted nothing from him. And now as God appears to Abram in chapter 15 He says to Abram, "your reward shall be very great." Abram's reward would not come from the king of Sodom. It would come from God. And it would be very great, according to the promises made in chapter 12.

But Abram has his doubts. He has wondered how the promises of chapter 12 could come true. And he has been mulling this over in his mind, and can't figure it out. Sarai was childless, and it didn't appear that she would be able to have any children. So he must have thought, 1) God promised that I will become a great nation, 2) becoming a great nation involves having an heir, 3) I don't have any children who could be an heir, 4) so Eliezer of Damascus will have to be my heir. But that doesn't sit well in Abram's mind. That would seem so anticlimactic. Abram longs to have an heir who would be his own flesh and blood. But that doesn't seem possible. In verses 2-3 Abram voices these concerns to the Lord. "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." Abram recognizes that God is in control of all these things. He says to God, "YOU have given me no offspring." So he recognizes that God is the one who opens and closes the womb. And he can't quite reconcile God's promise with the circumstances that God has brought about so far. What's going on, God?

At this point God speaks again, and he clarifies the promise. As we move through the narrative the promise becomes more and more defined. This is an interesting characteristic of God's revelation. A characteristic that we can see throughout the Bible. There is progressive revelation. The promises become more defined as redemptive history unfolds. The promises and prophecies about Christ begin in very vague statements, like Genesis 3:15. But the vision of the Messiah becomes clearer throughout the Old Testament, and then Jesus comes, and the apostles explain the meaning of His coming. This is how God reveals His promise to Abram as well. He begins with a somewhat vague promise that He would make Abram a great nation. And now in verse 4 He clarifies, "This man shall not be your heir [that is Eliezer will not be your heir]; your very own son shall be your heir." Literally, one who will come from your own loins, or from your own body. He will be your own flesh and blood.

Unfortunately, as we'll see in chapter 16, Abram later agreed to sleep with Hagar in order to produce an heir. That was an act of unbelief. And then God clarifies the promise even further, when He says very clearly in chapter 17, "Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac" (v. 19).

We're so reluctant to trust God's promises. We tend to shrink the promise down to something that we can accomplish. God is so big, and His promises are so great. Let's trust Him to do "far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20). Trust Him. He keeps His promises.

Next, God does this amazing thing to illustrate the promise. He wants to impress this promise upon Abram's mind in a very vivid way. So in verse 5 He takes Abram outside and says, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." God is saying that Abram's offspring will number as many as the stars in the sky. And, of course, the point is: It's a number that is so great it cannot be counted. You can't count the stars in the sky. Just like you can't count the dust of the earth, which was the analogy God used in chapter 13. God reassures Abram, Yes, I'm going to keep my promise, and it will be greater than you can even imagine.

Then a miracle happens in Abram's heart. He believes the promise, even though the promise is humanly impossible. It's unbelievable, in a sense. But Abram believes.

Genesis 15:6 is such an important statement in the history of salvation. Here in the very first book of the Bible, it says that the patriarch Abram “believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” This is justification by faith. Salvation by faith. Abram believed the Lord. He trusted God’s promise. And the Lord counted it to him as righteousness. Abram was saved by faith, and by faith alone. It was not on the basis of Abram’s works that God counted him righteous. It was by faith that Abram was counted righteous in God’s sight.

Do you see how wonderful this is? The doctrine of justification by faith alone is not just a New Testament teaching. It’s not something Paul made up. From the beginning of time, this is the way God works. He chooses to save sinners even though there’s no way sinners can be good enough for God. But when we trust in God, when we trust in God’s promises, when we trust in His promised Messiah, we are counted righteous. Just like Abram, although we have a much clearer picture of what God has promised and how He has fulfilled those promises.

In the New Testament Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 in two places (Galatians 3 and Romans 4). In both places Paul is demonstrating that salvation is by faith and not by works. In Galatians 3 he says, “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith” (v. 5). Do you see the contrast? Is it by working or trusting? Is it by doing or resting? Works or faith?

And then Paul shows that it has always been by faith, and he offers Abraham as an example. “just as Abraham [and here’s the quotation of Genesis 15:6, which states this truth so plainly] ‘believed God [not ‘worked for God’], and it was counted to him as righteousness” (v. 6).

In Romans 4, it’s as though Paul is preaching a sermon from Genesis 15:6. That is his text, and he is expounding its significance for the believers in Rome. The point he makes here is the same point he made in Galatians. Salvation is by faith. It has to be by faith. It can only be by faith. And it has always been by faith. Paul writes, “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham *believed* God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (vv. 2-3). It’s not works righteousness. If that was possible, then we would get the glory for our righteousness. We could boast. But that’s not even possible. We are sinners, and therefore we cannot produce any righteousness of our own. In contrast to works righteousness, Paul highlights the righteousness that was counted to Abraham by *faith*. The next two verses in Romans 4 (vv. 4-5) make this contrast very clear. “Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.” What a contrast! And what an amazing promise this is!

This is exactly the opposite of man-made religion. Man-made religion says, “Work for God, and He will reward you.” And that’s what every religion in the world teaches, except for biblical Christianity. The Bible says, “to the one who does NOT work but TRUSTS him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.” All the other religions say, “Work for God, and He will reward you.” But Christianity says, “Trust in God, and HE will work for YOU.” He justifies the ungodly, meaning He considers us to be righteous even though we are sinners. But how is this possible? How could Abram be counted righteous, though a sinner? And how can we be counted righteous, even though we are sinners?

The answer is Jesus Christ. Jesus IS righteous. He is not a sinner. And God graciously unites us to Christ by faith and then counts our sin as Christ's sin. And Jesus went to the cross to pay the penalty for that sin. And the other transaction is that Christ's righteousness is counted as ours. This is how we are counted righteous. By faith, our sin is transferred to Christ, and His righteousness becomes ours. We don't deserve this. We can't earn it. There's no way to work for it. We must simply trust in God's promise. We have to simply rest in Him and believe that He can justify the ungodly.

Trust Him, friends. He is our only hope. The religions of the world are bankrupt because they falsely assume that we can be good enough for God. That is false. It is a lie. None of us can be good enough to deserve God's favor. But Jesus Christ is perfect. He is the only One who deserves God's favor, and He is mighty to save us. Don't work. Trust. Throw yourself upon His mercy and plead for forgiveness. And, wonder of wonders, you will be counted righteous in God's sight, just like Abram.

In the remainder of the chapter God gives Abram another very vivid illustration of His commitment to keep His promises. In the first section of the chapter, Abram was concerned about the promise of children. Now he questions the promise of the land. In verse 7 God says, "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess." And then Abram says, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" Abram knows the promises, but he is impatient in waiting for them to be fulfilled. He wants them to happen right away. He wants a son right now. He wants the land right now. And since those things have not happened, he questions God's promises.

In a very similar way, we might question the validity of Romans 8:28. God, You said You would work all things together for my good. But I'm going through this trial, and I certainly can't see any good in it right now. What's going on? Are You there? Are You going to keep Your promise? And in spite of our impatience with God, God is so patient with us. He makes us wait. He makes us trust the promises.

God responded to Abram by carrying out this covenant ceremony in which He displayed His utter commitment to keep His promises. Let's look at this covenant that God made with Abram. The covenant ceremony involved a heifer, a female goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. It was a gruesome ceremony. Abram cut each of the animals in two, except for the birds because they were too small. And he laid the pieces in two rows. Jeremiah 34 refers to a similar ceremony, where God says, "And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts—the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf" (vv. 18-19).

This was how covenants were made. Instead of all the paperwork and legal forms, they would carry out a ceremony like this to impress upon both parties the seriousness of the agreement. Much blood would flow as these animals were cut in two, and the two halves were placed on the ground facing each other. And then the two partners to the covenant would walk between the pieces. And, in effect, they were saying, "If I break the conditions of this agreement, I must be torn apart like these animals. My blood is at stake here. My promise is my life." This was the significance of the covenant ceremony.

What's so profound about this covenant ceremony is that only one of the parties passes between the animals. Look at verse 12. "As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him." Abram was sleeping! This is another great illustration of salvation by faith alone. It's not by working, but by trusting, by resting in Him.

This covenant is completely by God's sovereign initiative. God acts. God establishes the covenant. And He keeps the covenant. Abram sleeps. We'll come back to this in verses 17-18, but first God clarifies the promise. Again, He gives further revelation to Abram about the Promised Land. And it begins with some sad news. Abram, himself, will not inhabit the land. And, in fact, it will be over 400 years before his descendants inhabit the land. They will be slaves in Egypt, and then God will bring them out with great possessions. Verse 16, "And they shall come back here in the fourth generation [referring to the 400 years], for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." This is why God does not allow Abram into the land immediately. The Amorites are living there, and God chooses to be patient with them. He is not ready to punish them yet, because their iniquity has not yet reached its full measure. As in the time of the flood, God waited patiently and gave the people time to repent. But eventually the judgment came. The same was true for the Amorites. They had 400 years to turn from their wicked ways. But then God punished them by bringing the Israelites into the land to destroy them. This revelation gives us an insight into God's justice as He deals with the people of Canaan. When God brought the Israelites into the Promised Land and told them to destroy the people who lived there, He was not being cruel or unfair. They deserved to be punished.

Now to verses 17-18, where God vividly displays His commitment to the covenant. "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces." Abram was in a deep sleep, and he did NOT pass between the animals. But God passed between the pieces. The smoking fire pot and the flaming torch represent the presence of God, passing between the animals that had been cut in two. And thus God established the covenant. In effect, He was saying, "If I break the covenant; if I fail to keep my promises, I will become like these animals." And the astonishing detail here is that God alone passes through the pieces. Abram does accompany Him. It is God, and God alone! The profound point is that the covenant depends entirely on God. It is established by His sovereign initiative, and does not depend on us, but on Him.

There is great hope for us here, if we will look away from ourselves and look to God alone for our salvation. There is great reason to trust in our covenant-keeping God. He makes promises, and He keeps His promises. We, on the other hand, are covenant-breakers. But in spite of our inability to keep the covenant, God remains faithful to uphold the covenant. Even though we are covenant-breakers, God provides His own Son to bear the curses that must come upon those who break the covenant. Jesus Christ is the One who became like those animals. His body was torn in two. His blood was shed. He died, in order to uphold the covenant. It is all of God. He does it all. And He is worthy of our complete trust.

So let us rest in Him. May we have a deep confidence in God's promises, and may we rejoice that we are counted righteous, not by works, not by anything we do, but by faith in our covenant-keeping God.