

**Scripture Reading: Genesis 15:1-22**

**“After these things the word of Jehovah came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward." 2 But Abram said, "Lord Jehovah, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house [or my servant] is my heir!" 4 And behold, the word of Jehovah came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir." 5 Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 And he believed in Jehovah, and He accounted it to him for righteousness. 7 Then He said to him, "I am Jehovah, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it." 8 And he said, "Lord Jehovah, how shall I know that I will inherit it?" 9 So He said to him, "Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. 11 And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. 12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. 13 Then He said to Abram: "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.**

**14 And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15 Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. 16 But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." 17 And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. 18 On the same day Jehovah made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates-- 19 the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, 20 the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, 21 the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."”**

## **"God Makes a Covenant with Abram"**

Once again I have read the entire 15<sup>th</sup> chapter here in the Book of Beginnings so we can see the full context and complete picture of how the Lord is interacting with Abram. We see God making two appearances, giving Abram two promises followed by two questions from Abram and two amazing demonstrations to illustrate the wonder of what God was going to do for our father Abraham!

As we discussed in the last two messages, Abram is asking honest questions and God is not only giving him honest answers, but powerful answers!

- **God truly loves to bless His people!**

Now before we go into the details of the text before us this morning I want to make sure we see the BIG picture of the events in this chapter. It begins with a vision and the first promise and then Abram is taken outside in darkness to see the stars! This could have been at night or early morning but it would still have to have been dark:

- **It was the beginning of a long day!**

God has used those stars in the heavens to assure Abram that not only will he have a natural heir from his own body, but countless multitudes of heirs!

This is not only physical descendants, but children of the promise as we learn from Paul: Jesus is the true Seed of Abraham and all those who are in Christ by faith are Abraham's heirs!

Then God comes to Abram a second time with promises about the land and the illustration here will require some work on Abrams part in preparing the animals for the demonstration! Abram spends that next day making these preparations and then protecting them from the vultures and once again it grows dark as the sun sets and God comes with His answer.

- As I said, it was a LONG day for Abram, but what a day it was!
- So let's dig into our text and see what lessons God has for us and of course once again how it all relates to the work of Jesus!

God promises to give land & Abram asks how it is that he will inherit this land that God was promising, and then God gives him some instructions...

9 "Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon."

Now there is quite a bit of speculation as to why God gave him this selection of animals but the most compelling insight is that they represent the various animals that will be used in the later sacrifices in the Tabernacle or Temple.

The other interesting challenge is asking why three-year-old animals? This does not relate to anything in the sacrificial systems and no one that I read spent much time on it! *[not unusual for commentators 😊]*

- I did come across something in Luke's Gospel account that could relate it to Jesus, which is usually a safe thing to do!

Luke gives us the chronological account and near the end of chapter nine Jesus sets His face like flint to go to Jerusalem to be there at His appointed time... A time of visitation that most of the Jews would miss. Jesus drives this point home in chapter thirteen dealing the Jews who refuse to believe telling them that the master of the house will at some point close the door and say to those on the outside, "I never knew you."

Then Jesus says at verse 28, "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God [speaking of faithful Jews], and yourselves thrust out. *[those who refused to see Jesus as Messiah]*

29 They [speaking of the Gentiles] will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God. 30 And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last." The Pharisees warn Jesus about Herod, and Jesus says to them, "Go, tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected.'

Jesus refers to His earthly ministry as three days and we know that He ministered for about three years, so I would suggest that God had this in mind in picking-three year-old animals!

But whatever the reason for their age, we are going to see these animals used here in a covenantal ceremony and it is interesting that in the text Abram seems to know just what to do in making the preparations...

10 "Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two."

Some will argue that God could have given other instructions that were not recorded; which seems unlikely... Still others say that Abram was just copying the covenantal practices that he learned while in Chaldea, again something that I think is unlikely.

This type of 'cutting a covenant' was common in ancient cultures, but the question again is what the source is? Does it relate to the sacrifices we saw in the garden and as men moved to the east or the result of copying pagan practices?

- **I think you know which I would lean toward!**

**And I think we can have great confidence that Abraham is following God's instructions when we read how the Lord gave assurances to Isaac later in Genesis chapter 26 regarding these very same promises we see here in chapter 15:**

**"4 And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; 5 because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws."**

**Just as we saw with tithing to Melchizedek, or those earlier sacrifices, God had given commandments, laws and statues long before Moses got the ones given on stone tablets.**

- **So what we see Abram doing here was not uncommon when a covenant was being made or 'cut.'**

**Animals were killed and divided and the parties to the covenant would pass between them indicating that they would be willing to have done to them what was done to those animals if they violated the terms of the covenant. We have only one example of this in the Scriptures, but I think it shows how seriously this is taken by God. It is found in the 34<sup>th</sup> chapter of Jeremiah where God is preparing to send His people off to Babylon for seventy years of judgment... Earlier, a covenant had been made or cut that proclaimed liberty for slaves according to the Law, something that may have been done during the various reforms of King Josiah, the last of the faithful Kings, and it pleased God. Overtime this covenant was broken and so the Lord says through His prophet, "18 And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it-- 19 the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf-- 20 I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. Their dead bodies shall be for meat for the birds of the heaven and the beasts of the earth."**

- **Not a pretty ending, but exactly what they had asked for in making that covenant...**

**Vultures are often seen as God's enemies coming to eat up the people and that is what we see as Abram waits for God after preparing the animals: 11 "And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away." There is all sorts of speculations about what the animals and birds might represent at this point, but I think it best to see this as faithful Abraham being faithful and waiting on God. As the day draws to a close, the vultures go to find their rest and Abram falls into a deep sleep, one partly of exhaustion after a long night and day, but also one that allows God to answer his honest question... And just as we see with Daniel many years later, Abram gets more than he bargained for as God tells him the history that is to follow. In Daniel's case he knew the 70 years of exile was near an end and prayed to know what was next, and in giving him an answer God tells him of four great Kingdoms that would oppress and protect God's people until the time of Messiah: It overwhelmed Daniel and that is what we see here with Abram as well:**

**12 "Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. 13 Then He said to Abram: "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. 14 And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions."**

**There is a LOT crammed into those three verses: Abram, nor his children or grandchildren are going to take immediate possession of the land.**

**In fact, they will first face many years of bondage. Not the kind of news Abram was looking for I am sure.**

- **Thus it is referred to as a horror and darkness.**

Although the news is not at all what Abram wanted God does tell him how long the persecution would last and why there would be a delay...

- God has His purposes in all things!

Later references to these events in Exodus, Acts and Galatians talk about 430 years and thus this is another favorite spot for critics of the Bible to say that it is full of contradictions. This is one of the easier ones to explain: Here God refers to the four hundred years of persecution which begins with Ismael, whose mother was Egyptian, persecuting Isaac. Four hundred years after that God's people are coming out of Egypt with great possessions as promised here. The other references speak of the time from Abram's call, which was about thirty years earlier and thus you have 430 years used there.

Next we see a bit of comfort for Abram: 15 "Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age." We will see this fulfilled as we continue on in Genesis and it should bring all of us great comfort to know that God is in control of our lives and our deaths!

Then God brings the good news about Abram's heirs: 16 "But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." It is Jacob and his children that go down to Egypt and as God promised men like Moses, the fourth from Levi and Caleb the fourth from Judah bring God's people into the promised land. In January, Lording willing, we will consider the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah which comes very soon after these visions and prophecies...

But the sin of the land that was to be the Promised Land was not yet full. Thus, we should remember that as God works out history according to His good plans, it can involve discipline and maturing for His people and it can include extending mercy to the wicked giving them time to repent!

Finally we come to the second dramatic event in this chapter:

- Earlier Abram was taken out to see the hosts of heaven in the night sky...
- Now he sees God cutting a covenant!

17 "And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces."

In verse 18 we will see that God has made or cut a covenant! The smoking oven and burning torch should bring together many images that we see in the Scriptures of God's presence. We have the burning bush where God appeared to Moses, we have the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night that followed Israel, we have the smoke and fire as God thunders on Mt. Sinai and of course we see the glory cloud fill the tabernacle and the temple after they are consecrated. It is clearly the Lord who passes between the pieces, but we must note that it is ONLY the Lord who passes.

This covenant is an unconditional covenant from man's perspective because it is only God who accepts the responsibility of fulfilling it and that He has done down through history! That is made clear in verse 18" On the same day Jehovah made [or cut] a covenant with Abram, saying:

"To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates-- 19 the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, 20 the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, 21 the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."

- The fullest list of nations given regarding the land of Canaan.
- Also the broadest description!

It is also important to note that God said "to your descendants I HAVE given this land!"

**Just as we must see how the promise of descendants is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus so we must see the land promises fulfilled there as well.**

**With Christmas approaching, let me ask the children a question:**

- **Where was Jesus born?**

**And for the adults as we prepare to sing Joy to the World in that joyous season...**

- **How far does the rule of Jesus extend?**

**Far as the curse is found or as we are instructed in the Great Commission, to all the nations!**

**That is the final fulfilment of the land promises given to Abram and confirmed by the Lord as He cut this covenant!**

- **So what does it mean for us today?**

**Pastor Robert Candlish, whose Studies in Genesis Charles Spurgeon called THE commentary on Genesis, suggested that it parallels the experience of the Apostle Peter and the others on the Mount of Transfiguration...**

- **And that Peter uses such experiences to encourage the Saints down through the ages!**

**By way of comparison, on that mount Peter awoke from a deep sleep to see Jesus discussing the future work He was to do with Moses & Elijah and then saw the glory of God descend upon His beloved Son.**

**Peter reflects back on that experience as he encourages the Saints in his final epistle just as I am sure that Abram encouraged Isaac & Jacob with accounts of this amazing day...**

**I want to close with Peter's words from that Epistle which he begins with a warm greeting: "1 Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: *[written to people of faith!]*"**

***Peter continues with his desire for them & us:***

**2 "Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, 3 as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, 4 by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust."**

**Peter goes on to challenge us to build Godly character and to "be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; 11 for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."**

- **That is quite a promise, just as Abraham sharing with his son about the future would have seemed amazing!**
- **Peter then uses his similar experience to encourage us!**

**12 "For this reason I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth...."**

**15 Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease.**

**16 For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty."**

- **Peter, James & John were there!**

17 **“For He [Jesus] received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." 18 And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.”**

- **Again Peter stresses that they were THERE, but he does not encourage us to try and seek similar experiences...**
- **No he uses that experience to confirm the truth that we all have...**

19 **“And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; 20 knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation,**

21 **for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”**

- **May we take Peter’s admonition to heart and strive to be people of the Book!**
- **May we follow the example of our Father Abraham so it can be said of us, ‘they believed God and it was accounted to them for righteousness.**

### **Communion Meditation: John 13**

**“3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, 4 rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. 5 After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. 6 Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?" 7 Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." 8 Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." 9 Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!" 10 Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.””**