

God’s Covenant with Abraham

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Overview

God rewards Abram for his generosity towards Melchizedek and for his renouncing of the riches offered him by the king of Sodom. He appears to him in a vision and promises his help, many descendants, and the land of Canaan.

- All that is required of Abram is that he **believe** in the promise that God himself, **through the rite of a covenant**, undertakes to fulfill.

Chapter 15 emphasizes the gravity of God’s promise and speaks of the faithfulness of God, who will keep his word.

II. REVIEW OF CHAPTER 14

As Abram settled into the land of Canaan, we saw that he was a man growing in trust in God and in virtue. After repenting of his behaviour in Egypt, he made a fresh start with God. He showed himself to be dedicated to his family, even to the point of risking his life to save his nephew, Lot.

He received God's blessing from Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High, who made an offering of bread and wine. He recognized that God is worthy of human generosity.

In a test of his allegiance, he refused the offer of great wealth in order to live only in God's debt. He appeared to be a man of solid faith.

A. Waiting on the Lord

From the time Abram left Haran to the time of the events recorded in chapter fourteen of Genesis, probably about ten years had gone by. In chapter fifteen, we will see what effect waiting can have on a man's faith. The promise of descendants and a great nation was wonderful, but it had to begin with at least one heir.

Although Abram firmly believes in God, what is he to make of the time it is taking for the really big event to happen? How does his faith hold up under that kind of test?

III. ABRAHAM QUESTIONS GOD

In Genesis 15:1-6, we hear a conversation between Abram and God about this test. It shows the intimacy and love that God and Abram shared.

[This exchange is the first recorded prayer in Scripture—not, of course, the first time a man has prayed but our first record of a prayer].

We already know Abram as a man of faith and obedience; so we can assume that he spoke regularly with God. The prayer recorded in Genesis 15 begins the long history of written accounts of what men of faith say to God, especially when they are tested, and what God answers back.

Read: Genesis 15:1-6

[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."

[2] But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"

[3] And Abram said, "Behold, thou hast given me no offspring; and a slave born in my house will be my heir."

[4] And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir."

[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 descendants be."

[6] And he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.

A. God Assures Abraham Once More

"After these things" (verse 1) refers to the events in chapter 14, when Abram rescued Lot, gave a tithe to Melchizedek, and turned down an offer of booty from the king of Sodom.

Why do you suppose that "after these things," God would appear in a vision to Abram, encouraging him not to be afraid and speaking about a very great reward?

Abram may have been worried that spurning the king of Sodom's offer would cause trouble for him later. He had stood firm in the face of temptation by a powerful king. Later, he had been heroic in giving a tithe of all he owned to Melchizedek.

Yet what would be the practical effects of those noble choices?

- Would he become an enemy to this king?
- He had given up some of his wealth and turned down the possibility of more, but what if circumstances in the region changed?
- What if there was another famine? What if, what if...

It is not surprising, then, that God appears to Abram to confirm and encourage him in his choices. "*Fear not,*" God tells him, and He promises to be Abram's defender. As for his loss of money and possibly his security in the land, whatever he lost will be made up in a "great reward."

The "reward," God's free gift, is associated with Abram's faith [verse 6].

This visit from God shows Him to be well aware of the ebbs and flows of faith, that creatures made of dust need reassurance from time to time, even (or perhaps especially) when they have made a heroic act of faith.

B. Abram's Prayer

In verses 2-3 Abram begins a conversation with God – the first recorded prayer in Scripture.

- What complaint does Abram make against God?
- What indications are there that this is a problem that has been on Abram's mind for awhile?

Abram does not understand how God can keep his promise He made to him in Haran [chap. 12]. Abram suggests that God hasn't really kept His promise.

Remember that it has been about ten years since he left Haran. He and Sarai are getting older every year.

It appears that Abram's mind has been fixed on this dilemma long enough for him to think he had to come up with another plan to obtain an heir.

- Eliezer was Abram's slave; it was not uncommon in that culture for barren couples to adopt a son to make him their heir.
- Abram seems to think that he will have to resort to this practice because God has not given him a son of his own.
- We can't miss the tone of disappointment and frustration in his words. The long wait for Abram and Sarai to see concrete proof of God's promise is taking its toll.

C. God's Response

The first thing God does in response to Abram's doubt is to speak the truth to him: *"Your own son shall be your heir."* Perhaps Abram thought that he had misunderstood God—there had been no mention directly of his own son being his heir, although that was certainly the implication.

- God speaks to clear away any confusion Abram may have about the son and heir God will give him.

Then, knowing how difficult it is for Abram to believe this word, God takes him outside and tells him to look at the stars, challenging him to count them. He assures Abram that his descendants will be as innumerable as the stars.

[Try to picture Abram gazing at the stars. What do you think was going through his mind? Describe the scene that you see as accurately as you can].

God's response is very interesting. What kind of response do we think Abram was hoping for?

- Perhaps he wanted a timetable or a schedule of when this son would appear.

- Maybe he wanted reassurance from God that He recognized the limitations to reproduction brought on by age.
- Was he hoping to hear God say, "Yes, I can see you aren't getting any younger. It's time to get on with this."

That is not what happens. Instead, God directs Abram's attention to a beautiful sight in nature, the countless stars of heaven. God allows the stars to be witnesses to His power and wisdom. He does not defend or explain Himself to Abram.

He simply joins the evidence of His own word of revelation to Abram ("*Your own son shall be your heir*") to the evidence from nature that He knows what He's doing. Then he leaves the decision up to Abram.

D. God Wants Abram to Exercise Faith

This kind of response acknowledges Abram's need for encouragement in a time of doubt; it is not contemptuous of human weakness. Nevertheless, it does not make God accountable to Abram.

God is asking him to exercise faith.

- This is not blind faith, since Abram has a firm word from God, as well as the witness of the stars.
- Abram will have to decide whether He can trust God for what he can't see on the strength of what he can.

E. Righteousness in Abram

[6] And he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.

In verse 6, we see that Abram "believed the Lord," and God "reckoned" or "counted" it as righteousness in Abram. In other words, Abram's trust in the promises of God made him righteous, or "pleasing," in God's sight.

By faith in God's word, Abram was justified, i.e., made righteous, in God's sight!

Catholics speak of this as being in a state of grace. This was not the first time Abram had put his trust in God.

What does it mean to be made righteous or justified in God’s sight?

F. Justification: Definition

- One means of expressing the doctrine of salvation in the New Testament.
- It can refer to a divine action as well as a spiritual process.
- As an action, justification is the moment when God makes righteous the one who believes in Christ and establishes him or her in a covenant relationship with Himself. Colossians 1:13-14 describes it as follows:

He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

- As a process, justification is the growth in righteousness and grace that takes place in the believer who embraces the demands of the Gospel and yields himself or herself to the leading of the Spirit [*Catholic Bible Dictionary – Scott Hahn, General Editor, pg 496*].

IV. THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF ABRAM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Read: Read Romans 4:1-4, 9-12

The episode in Genesis 15 of Abram's faith making him righteous is one that is frequently recalled in the New Testament, especially by St. Paul.

[At the time of the Protestant Reformation, its interpretation became a source of sharp disagreement between Protestants and Catholics].

A. Justification: by “Works” or “Faith”?

It is worth pausing a moment to consider the following passage from Romans.

[1] What then shall we say about Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?

[2] For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

[3] For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was

reckoned to him as righteousness."

[4] Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due.

About the passage in Romans, note the following:

a. The word "justified" in verse 2 means being in a state of grace, cleansed from sin and pleasing in God's sight.

b. St. Paul's reference to "works" (vs. 2) is not a reference to the "good works" that we do from faith and gratitude to God.

The term as he uses it here refers to "the works" or "rules" that made the Jews a nation separate from all others, beginning with circumcision and including the dietary and liturgical laws, as well as the Ten Commandments, that God gave to Israel through Moses.

Many Jews of St. Paul's day believed that simply by virtue of being born a Jew, observing all the requirements or "works" of the law, they were righteous in God's sight.

- For them, righteousness was not a matter of faith and trust in God but a matter of keeping all the rules.

c. To prove that Jews should not look to their observance of the Jewish law in order to be pleasing in God's sight, St. Paul uses Abraham as an example. He was, after all, the first Jew.

Abraham was "reckoned as righteous" before there were any Jewish rules or "works." See that in vss. 9-12, St. Paul shows that Abraham was righteous in God's sight before he was circumcised (which would be a sign of the covenant between God and His people, but which doesn't happen until chapter 17 of Genesis).

- **A true Jew, as St. Paul says, is one who is "not merely circumcised," but who follows "the example of the faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised" (vs. 12).**

d. St. Paul's point in all of this is to say that Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles) are all "justified," or put into a state of grace, in the same way—through faith and not by keeping a set of rules. It is a gift from God (grace) and not something we earn.

e. Notice that St. Paul does not use the phrase "faith alone" when he writes about Abraham. He simply refers to Abraham's "faith."

His point is that Christians must put their faith in an outrageous promise from God just as Abraham did. The promise of the gospel is wildly improbable.

- We must believe that God sent His Son in human flesh to live and die for us, sinners that we are.
- We must believe that Jesus worked miracles and came back from the dead.
- We must believe that He paid the price for our rebellion and made it possible for us to be forgiven and to live forever with God, in new bodies and divine glory.

To put our trust in God for this promise requires the same kind of faith that Abraham had, the kind of faith defined in Heb. 11:1: *"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*

B. Salvation through “Faith Alone”?

Catholics speak of salvation as coming through "faith," but we do not use the phrase "faith alone," a phrase that Martin Luther coined. Read James 2:14-24. Why is the phrase "faith alone" not useful when speaking about salvation?

C. “Once Saved, Always Saved”?

Looking again at Genesis 15:1-6, if Abram is righteous in God's sight because of his faith in the promises of God, should we assume that this status is something that he can never lose? Has this act of faith made him permanently pleasing to God?

If we say that Abram's status of being pleasing in God's sight can never be lost, we would have to say that Abram's freedom has been lost. Would he never again have to make a choice to obey God? Would he automatically choose to do God's will, in every situation?

We will have to pay attention to the rest of the story to see if Abram's act of faith in Genesis 15 has made him permanently pleasing in God's sight, with no more tests of his faith necessary.

God’s Covenant with Abraham

I. THE COVENANT OF FAITH

Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, "To your descendants I will give this land" [Genesis 12:7].

Following Abram’s latest act of faith and trust in God’s word, *“And he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness,”* God will now upgrade His first promise to Abram to the status of a covenant.

This was the first of three *promises* God made to Abram [see Genesis 12]:

- The promise of a **LAND AND A NATION;**
- The promise of **KINGSHIP AND A NAME;**
- The promise of **BLESSING FOR ALL NATIONS.**

The strength of God’s resolve to give the land of Canaan to Abram and his descendants [the people of Israel] is vividly demonstrated by his ordaining a rite of covenant to externalize the commitment undertaken by both parties.

[The Old and New Testaments point to the Old and New Covenants. What we call “testament” the ancient Israelites call “covenant.” The story of salvation is recorded as a sequence of covenants that God makes with His people].

A. What is a Covenant?

What is a covenant? Most people think that a covenant is the same thing as a contract. But covenants are much more than mere contracts. Covenants and contracts both establish relationships, but the *type* of relationship they establish is very different.

In ancient Semitic cultures, covenants were sometimes sealed by cutting animals into pieces and having the two parties making the covenant pass between the pieces (see Jeremiah 34:18). The idea was to demonstrate their commitment to keeping the terms of the covenant by taking an oath: "May what happened to these animals happen to me if I don't keep this covenant."

B. Contracts and Covenants - Differences

- Contracts are made with a **promise**;
 - **Covenants are sworn with an oath**;
- Contracts are signed in your name;
 - **Covenants are sealed in God's name**;
- Contracts facilitate an exchange of goods or services; *"Let's trade – this is yours and that is mine."*
 - **Covenants mediate an exchange of persons**: *"I am yours and you are mine."*
- Contracts are temporary (no ongoing relationship required)
 - **Covenants are permanent**; even to future generations.

For ancient Israelites, the difference between covenants and contracts are about significant as the difference between **marriage** and **prostitution** [cf. *Journey through Scripture: Genesis to Jesus – St. Paul Centre for Biblical Theology*].

Read: Genesis 15:7-21

[7] And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess."

[8] But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"

[9] He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon."

[10] And he brought him all these, cut them in two, and laid each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.

[11] And when birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove

them away.

[12] As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram; and lo, a dread and great darkness fell upon him.

[13] Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years;

[14] but I will bring judgment on the nation which they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.

[15] As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.

[16] And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

[17] When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

[18] On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

[19] the land of the Ken'ites, the Ken'izzites, the Kad'monites,

[20] the Hittites, the Per'izzites, the Reph'aim,

[21] the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Gir'gashites and the Jeb'usites."

C. Does Abram Doubt God’s Promise?

Abram asks a question about his possession of the land of Canaan of the Lord in vs. 8. Is it a question of doubt? What kind of question is it?

Abram has already put his trust in God, so the question he asks cannot be prompted by doubt. Perhaps he is asking for some physical demonstration that will give evidence of the promise God has made for the land, just as the stars had been evidence of his human descendants.

It is not the question, "What will You show me that will make me believe?"

Rather, it is the question, "What will You show me that represents the promise You have made?" He is asking for a sign of the covenant God is making with him, not for a sign of God's trustworthiness.

The joining of God's promises to material realities in nature has always been at the heart of God's covenants with men.

D. Abram Prepares the Animals

Abram carries out God's instructions regarding the animals to be used in the covenant rite. Picture Abram setting up this elaborate arrangement of dead animals. He had to drive away the birds of prey.

What does that tell you about the time factor in this scene? What do you think was going through his head?

It looks like Abram once again had to wait on God. If he had to chase away the birds of prey, the carcasses must have been lying there for awhile. There must have been time for doubts to creep into Abram's mind. Did he have to fend them off, just as he fended off the birds? This picture of Abram, sitting in the sun with a pile of dead animals, waiting for God to act, is a powerful one.

In a way, it will be repeated throughout the history of Israel and the history of man. Israel, the great nation promised to Abram, would repeatedly lie in pieces, waiting on God to act.

The Church, the new Israel, continues this waiting. "Though already present in his Church, Christ's reign is nevertheless yet to be fulfilled 'with power and great glory' by the king's return to earth. This reign is still under attack by the evil powers, even though they have been defeated definitively by Christ's Passover. Until everything is subject to him, 'until there be realized new heavens and a new earth in which justice dwells, the pilgrim Church, in her sacraments and institutions, which belong to this present age, carries the mark of this world which will pass, and she herself takes her place among the creatures which groan and travail yet and await the revelation of the sons of God.' That is why Christians pray, above all in the Eucharist, to hasten Christ's return by saying to him: *Marana tha!* 'Our Lord, come!'" (CCC 671)

12. Abram's deep sleep is reminiscent of Adam's sleep, when God solved the only problem he had in Eden, which was being alone. It perhaps represents man's ultimate inability to solve his own problems or ensure his own fate. It underscores

dramatically how divine initiative and human helplessness come together to accomplish God's loving purposes (think of the sleeping apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane, upon whom Christ intended to build His Church).

13. It appears that the nation destined to come from Abram will have a time of suffering before it achieves glory. This, of course, describes the early history of Israel, which began as a collection of twelve tribes that wound up in slavery in Egypt (more about that later in Genesis). They multiplied greatly while their bondage worsened. Finally, after about 400 years there, God called Moses to lead His people out of slavery and back home to Canaan again. The covenant God made with Moses at Mt. Sinai (see Exodus 19-24) would be a ratification of this promise of land that He makes to Abram, while Abram is in a deep sleep.

Why would the nation to come from Abram suffer such a humiliation in its early life? It was to teach Israel a lesson that would be repeated throughout her history. God chose Israel not because it was a better nation than all the others—how can a nation of slaves in bondage have anything to boast about? He chose them because He wanted to show His power to those who, humanly speaking, have no hope of saving themselves. In their own national history, they would live out the story of Eden, a story of human beings in bondage and very far from home, whose only hope is the power and mercy of God. The greatness of Israel was meant to be rooted in humility.

14. Responses will vary. Fire is a powerful presence among us. Its light can lead the way or make us draw back. Its

appearance can console or terrify. Its heat can sustain or destroy; it can harden or melt. How the fire is experienced depends on what comes into contact with it. In that sense, fire is an apt symbol of God's presence. It does justice to all that He is in His essence. The Scripture consistently refers to the fire of God, as both an expression of His power and love, as well as His wrath and judgment.

15. God's covenant with Abram, to give him and his descendants the land of Canaan, is one in which He is the responsible party. This is the perfect picture of God's gracious condescension to man. God appears to be doing the work of both parties. He, of course, will never fail to keep His covenant. Abram's hopes for a future homeland are entirely secure. This is the first occasion in Abram's life when God confirms a part of the promises He made to him when He called him out of Haran (see Gen. 12:1-3) by sealing a covenant with him. He had promised to make a "great nation" of him (which will take descendants and land), to make his "name great" (which means a dynasty of kings to come forth from him), and to make him a "blessing" to "all the families of earth" (which means Abram will be the source of universal blessing, which later came through Jesus Christ, a descendant of Abram). There will be two more occasions when promises become covenants in Abraham's life. Each is preceded by a time of testing (in this case, the test of time) and each is followed by an action of God (in this case, the "sign" of the covenant given in the liturgical ceremony of the animal pieces and fire).