

4.

The Lord's Covenant with Abram is Confirmed

By the time we read the verses of Genesis 15, approximately seven years had passed since the Lord had called Abram out of Haran and much had happened. However, one crucial thing had not happened. Even though seven years prior the Lord had promised He would make Abram into a great nation, he and his wife, Sarai remained childless. Of course, the birth of children is required in order to make Abram's descendants "like the dust of the earth," but Abram had yet to see the birth of his first son.

Also, during this seven year period, Abram was still very much a stranger in a foreign land. He had traveled all the way to Egypt and returned, but had yet to settle into a land of his own that stretched "as far as the eyes can see." Instead, he had settled for a plot of land beneath the trees of Mamre. The reality of Abram's existence far undershot the grand promises of God that led him out of Haran. This evidently caused Abram to be discouraged. We can discern his discouragement when reading of his interaction with the Lord in Genesis 15.

The Lord initiates the conversation by exhorting Abram, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward" (Gen. 15:1). Abram responded, "'O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir'" (15:2, 3). The Lord's exhortation reveals Abram's uncertainty; he was tempted to give up on the Lord's promise and give way to fear produced by unbelief. It is here in Genesis 15 that the Lord re-states, in graphic and striking ways, the promise he made seven years earlier.

First, he reassures Abram by repeating the promise but with

more emphasis on the fact that a child will “come from your own body and be your heir.” Earlier, in Genesis 12, the Lord compared the number of Abram’s descendants to “the dust of the earth,” but now he uses an even more glorious analogy by having Abram look up at the night sky and saying to him, “count the stars - if indeed you can count them” and then the Lord said - “so shall your offspring be” (Gen 15:4, 5). Abram was encouraged and believed the Lord, and his heart was set at peace by the Lord’s assurances. We know this because of Genesis 15:6, “He believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” Of course, this was not the first time Abram had faith. He also had faith in Genesis 12 and he had trusted the Lord ever since. But here in this encounter, the Lord renewed His commitment to Abram, and Abram’s faith was renewed in turn. The Lord and Abram continue in faithfulness to each other.

The Lord then drove the reality of His covenant faithfulness home to Abram by employing a graphic covenant-making ceremony. We use a covenant-making ceremony with today’s marriage ceremony. The exchange of rings accompanies vows of faithfulness to one another. The ring ceremony is a symbolic illustration of what is stated verbally. With Abram the Lord does something similar, yet very different. He commanded Abram to prepare a ceremony common in Abram’s day. Typically, a king would establish a covenant treaty with a vassal, or a king of a lesser city, by having them agree to certain terms having to do with privileges and obligations toward one another. The vassal, or lesser king, would verbally pledge his loyalty to the greater king in agreement with the terms of the covenant.⁴ He would then walk between the carcasses of animals that had been cut in half and spread out on the ground. The sacrificed animals signified the penalty that would befall the lesser king for breaking his pledge of loyalty. Walking through the animals signified recognition of and agreement with the covenantal terms. The covenant was then officially ratified, just like when rings are given in the marriage ceremony, the vow is now symbolically ratified.

This is precisely what we see the Lord do in Genesis 15:9-21. He didn’t promise to do any more for Abram than what He had already promised in Genesis 12. What he did was ratify His words with a graphic ceremony of commitment. However, the Lord did the opposite of what we might expect from Him. Given how this ceremony worked in the ancient world, we would expect Abram, who is the lesser, to be

4 O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*. P&R, 1980, 129-130.

made to walk between the animal halves, swearing allegiance to the greater, the Lord God. But the Lord did the opposite. Rather than Abram walking between the sacrificed animals, the Lord Himself symbolically walked between the sacrifices by sending a vision of a smoking fire-pot with a blazing torch while Abram looked on. The Lord was guaranteeing His fidelity to His promises at the cost of His own life, if necessary! The ceremony was concluded with these words, “On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram....” This was how Abram “can know that (he) will gain possession of it” (Gen. 15:8). The promise is made *with a ceremonial vow*. The writer of Hebrews explains it this way,

Men swear by someone greater than themselves, *and the oath confirms what is said* and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to *make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear* to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things by which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged (Heb. 6:16-18).

The point of confirming “what is said” by an oath is to encourage those who are tempted to be discouraged with God’s promise. This is precisely what the Lord was doing for Abram in his time of need. And it would be the encouragement of the Lord’s faithfulness that would enable Abram to remain faithful to the Lord and trust Him. It would be this steadfast faith in the promised privileges that would enable Abram to obey His Lord and keep his obligations.

