

## Genesis 15:1-6 Covenant Promises

The Christian faith is just that, a matter of faith. This might seem obvious, but in fact, most other religions of the world rely less upon what one believes than what one does. That is, they are not matters of faith, but rather matters of works. Whether it is the Five Pillars of Islam, the Eightfold Path of Buddhism, or the Law of the Jews, other religions place the emphasis on what the adherent to the faith does to earn the favor of god, rather than on what they believe. They are more a matter of ritual than orthodoxy.

This distinctive has not, however, left Christianity without its issues during its two millennium history. The first concern is that if the faith centers on matters of what one believes rather than what one does, then it is paramount to determine what exactly it is one must believe. The early centuries of Church history are filled with polemical writings of Church Fathers and contentious meetings of Church Councils as they sought to take the narratives of Scripture and “discover” the doctrines of the faith. By God’s grace, many of those issues have been largely resolved among orthodox Christians, yet there still remain disagreements over several important issues. And perhaps most ironically, the disagreements extend to which of those issues are really important. That is, there are not only disagreements about what one believes, but also about what one must believe to be considered an adherent of the faith.

Another challenge of the Christian faith, is that since it emphasizes what one believes rather than what one does, does that mean works have no place at all? That is, can a person simply believe certain truths, but act in a manner that is inconsistent with those beliefs? Put simply, what does saving faith *look* like? Throughout the years, the Church has struggled to define the extent to which works must line up with faith.

As we come to Genesis 15, we enter into the heart of the Abrahamic narrative. Abram had been called by God to

“Go forth from your country,  
And from your relatives  
And from your father’s house,  
To the land which I will show you” (Genesis 12:1).

Abram had abandoned all that he had depended on - his family, his trading connections, his very home - to trust in God. To be sure, that faith had wavered at times. Abram had not been at his best when he journeyed to Egypt and doubted God’s protection. Nevertheless, God had been faithful to His promises. God had blessed Abram. God had blessed those who blessed Abram and cursed those who had not. God had protected Abram in a time of war and given Abram success. Abram’s faith had grown, and he had repaid that grace by offering to the priest/king Melchizedek a tenth of all he had. After all, Melchizedek was a priest of *Ēl Elyōn*, the God Most High.

The passage we have before us today is a dialogue between Abram and God. First, God made a declaration of His intention toward Abram, and Abram responded with a question and the offer of a

compromise. Then, God then reaffirmed His promise to Abram, following which Abram declared his belief in the Lord. Finally, upon Abram's expression of faith, God declared that Abram was righteous in His sight.

### **The Promise Stated**

The narrative begins by framing the timing of the occasion. It occurred "after these things" (v. 1). That transition is frequently used in Scripture and clearly referred to the events recounted in chapter 14, that is, Abram's war against the four kings and his rescue of Lot. So after the encounter with the King of Jerusalem and the king of Sodom, Abram had returned to his home. Lot had, as we will see later, returned to his home in Sodom as well. It was then that "the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision" (v. 1).

Though the phrase "word of the Lord" occurs throughout the Old Testament, it appears only twice in the book of Genesis, both in this chapter. It is the main form used when prophets described how they acquired their message, for example "the word of the Lord came to . . ." Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jonah, Haggai, and Zechariah all use this phrasing. In this case, the purpose was to establish Abram in his identity as a prophet, an identity that was recognized by Abram's contemporaries (Genesis 20:7).

Visions and dreams were a common means God used when revealing Himself to the patriarchs and prophets. The distinction between an actual physical manifestation of God, whether on human form or in some other way (thunderstorm, etc.), and a dream or vision is difficult to distinguish. Words such as 'saw' or 'envisioned' often preface a prophetic phenomenon of either kind. The point is that it was the message that was to be the focus of the passage, and not the particular method by which that message was delivered.

And that message was one of assurance. God began with a command, "do not fear" (v. 1). Ironically, when God spoke this same message to Isaac (Genesis 26:24) and Jacob (Genesis 46:3) they were in dangerous situations. Isaac was quarrelling with Abimelech, king of the Philistines, over water rights in the area where they both had settled. Isaac feared that Abimelech might take action against him. Jacob, in his old age, was about to abandon his homeland in Canaan to join his sons in Egypt. In each case, the patriarch feared that all might be lost. But here, Abram had no need for such fear. To the contrary, Abram had just survived war. He had been in a situation fraught with danger, yet the Bible records neither Abram's anxiety nor God's assurance in that episode.

Yet, it is often the habit of God to assure those to whom He makes an appearance, since fear is the natural response to the presence of the Almighty, both in the case of individuals (Isaiah 6:5) and the people of Israel as a whole (Exodus 20:18). Abram may be able to confront the army of Chedorlaomer without trepidation, but the appearance of the Lord God in a dream was not so easily managed. But perhaps God was not only trying to put Abram at ease. The promise that followed shows that God was also trying to assure Abram that He had not forgotten His promises to the still childless patriarch. God continued,

"Do not fear, Abram,  
I am a shield to you;  
Your reward shall be very great" (v. 1).

The metaphor of God as a shield fit perfectly with God's command that Abram not be afraid. God often used this illustration to assure His servants.

“Blessed are you, O Israel;  
Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord,  
Who is the shield of your help  
And the sword of your majesty!  
So your enemies will cringe before you,  
And you will tread upon their high places” (Deuteronomy 33:29).

“But You, O Lord, are a shield about me,  
My glory, and the One who lifts my head” (Psalm 3:3).

“The Lord is my strength and my shield;  
My heart trusts in Him, and I am helped;  
Therefore my heart exults,  
And with my song I shall thank Him” (Psalm 28:7).

This idea of divine guardianship was linked with the promise of reward. This word can mean either the wages earned by a servant or the spoils of war, but in this case the context implies that it meant the reward for faithfulness. Prophesying about the destruction of Israel, Jeremiah wrote,

“‘Restrain your voice from weeping  
And your eyes from tears;  
For your work will be rewarded,’ declares the Lord,  
‘And they will return from the land of the enemy’” (Jeremiah 31:16).

The reward promised Abram for his faithfulness was offspring. It was only through a child that the promise of seed and land could be kept. This understanding was common in Hebrew thinking.

“Behold, children are a gift of the Lord,  
The fruit of the womb is a reward” (Psalm 127:3).

God was reassuring Abram that His promise of progeny had not been forgotten.

### **The Promise Doubted**

But that was the point at which Abram’s faith needed support. He believed God. He understood that he and his offspring would inherit the land of Canaan. But he was old and childless. Grasping for assurance and hoping to find a solution, “<sup>2</sup>Abram said, ‘O Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ <sup>3</sup>And Abram said, ‘since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir’” (v. 2-3).

For the first time there was dialogue between Abram and God. Until now, Abram had listened to and obeyed God, but Scripture does not record any conversation between the two. Abram addressed God using the divine name, *‘adōnay yahweh*. He began with respect. This name was not commonly used by

the patriarchs, but was employed by the prophets, especially Isaiah and Ezekiel. Moses and Joshua used that name when calling on God to deliver them (Deuteronomy 9:26; Joshua 7:7). It is also clear that Abram placed the responsibility for the fact that he has no children directly on the Lord. In this case, however, Abram not only brought to God's attention the fact that he did not have an heir, but even offered a possible solution. He suggested that Eliezer of Damascus become his heir.

Notice that Abram was not complaining that he is childless, but was wondering what would happen since he expected to remain so. That is, Abram wondered what was the use of his 'reward' if he did not produce an heir. So, without waiting for a response, Abram offered a solution. Eliezer was likely a household servant whom Abram had adopted. This process is attested in historical texts of the period. Often a childless couple would adopt someone, perhaps even a slave, to serve them during their lifetime and mourn them upon their passing. In return, the adopted son was heir presumptive to whatever assets the couple possessed. Should a child be born naturally to the couple after the adoption was made, the adopted son was demoted and the natural born son became heir. If the natural born son died before coming into his inheritance, however, the adopted son returned to his previous favored position. One can only imagine the intrigue involved in such situations.

Though adoption is not specifically mentioned in the biblical text, it is likely that this was what Abram meant. The idea was not unknown in later Israel.

“A servant who acts wisely will rule over a son who acts shamefully,  
And will share in the inheritance among brothers” (Proverbs 17:2).

### **The Promise Affirmed**

But God did not accept Abram's solution to the problem. There would be no surrogate heir. Instead, God asserted, “this man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir” (v. 4). God commanded Abram to be patient. He insisted that Abram wait on the Lord to fulfill His promises in His good time. It is worth noting that while God did specify that the promised child would come from Abram, He did not specifically state that Sarai would be the mother. This would be a cause for confusion later.

As if to give emphasis to His commitment, God “took him [Abram] outside and said, ‘now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ And He said to him, ‘so shall your descendants be’” (v. 5). Abram had already acknowledged that God was “Lord God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth” (Genesis 14:22). He could not now doubt that God was able to keep His promises.

The example God used reflected His character, and it became a commonplace saying among the people of Israel.

“He counts the number of the stars;  
He gives names to all of them.” (Psalm 147:4).

“Lift up your eyes on high  
And see who has created these stars,  
The One who leads forth their host by number,  
He calls them all by name;  
Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power,  
Not one of them is missing” (Isaiah 40:26).

This promise was given using other metaphors as well,

“<sup>16</sup>By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup>indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies” (Genesis 22:16-17).

“Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 28:14).

And it was a promise repeated throughout Israel’s history, as if to remind them not of their own strength, but of the power of the God they served.

To Isaac, “I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 26:4).

To Moses, “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever’” (Exodus 32:13).

To Jeremiah, “As the host of heaven cannot be counted and the sand of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the descendants of David My servant and the Levites who minister to Me” (Jeremiah 33:22).

Finally, this was a promise the Israelites, throughout their history, recognized that God had fulfilled.

“The Lord your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are this day like the stars of heaven in number” (Deuteronomy 1:10).

“You made their sons numerous as the stars of heaven,  
And You brought them into the land  
Which You had told their fathers to enter and possess” (Nehemiah 9:23).

Yet God needed to remind His people that such a great blessing was by His grace alone.

“<sup>7</sup>The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, <sup>8</sup>but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. <sup>9</sup>Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments; <sup>10</sup>but repays those who hate Him to their faces, to destroy them; He will not delay with him who hates Him, He will repay him to his face” (Deuteronomy 7:7-10).

### **The Promise Believed**

Upon seeing such a demonstration, Abram “believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (v.6). The word for ‘believed’ can be used with respect to God or man, and generally is used to express placing trust and confidence in someone.

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever.’ Then Moses told the words of the people to the Lord” (Exodus 19:9).

“So Achish believed David, saying, “He has surely made himself odious among his people Israel; therefore he will become my servant forever” (1 Samuel 27:12).

In Abram’s case, the point of Scripture is that Abram trusted in God for his future. His reliance was on nothing, or no one, else. There is an exclusivity with respect to believing. Abram trusted God alone. But this was not the first time Abram trusted God. He had, after all, left his homeland to go to Canaan at God’s command. So Scripture is not talking here about the initiation of Abram’s faith. Abram had acted on his faith before he spoke it. This was an affirmation of the faith which Abram had possessed from the beginning. Though it had wavered, and would do so again, it was still faith. And importantly, this scene created a vocabulary for our theology.

God responded to Abram’s spoken faith by “reckon[ing] it to him as righteousness” (v. 6). The verb *ḥāšab* can mean either to count or calculate or to plan for an intended purpose. It is the first construction that is used here. Another example is,

“How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity,  
And in whose spirit there is no deceit” (Psalm 32:2).

In this situation, God assigned the value of ‘righteousness’ to the faith of Abram. This was not because Abram had met the requirements of some covenant. Abram was not deserving of being counted righteous. It was entirely on the basis of God’s grace alone that Abram’s faith was credited to him as righteousness. There had been no mutual covenant between God and Abram. Abram’s declaration of faith was not an act, like that of keeping the Law. God had acted singularly throughout the entire episode. In fact, Abram could do nothing to enter into the promise the Lord had made him. No doubt he and Sarai

had been intimate throughout their many years of marriage but without issue. There was nothing more Abram could do.

Yet, to the Jews, Abram was found righteous because he had been successful in undergoing ten tests. His faithfulness in performing certain exemplary deeds was the cause of his receiving his just reward. For example, “<sup>51</sup>remember the deeds of the ancestors, which they did in their generations; and you will receive great honor and an everlasting name. <sup>52</sup>Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?” (1 Maccabees 2:51-52, New Revised Standard).

To the Jews, Abram’s faithfulness that *earned* him entrance into the covenant relationship with God. Then, by performing acts of faithfulness Abram had been considered righteous. To New Testament writers, however, righteousness was granted to Abram by God while he was still outside of any covenant relationship. Writers of the New Testament relied heavily on this concept when expounding doctrine.

“<sup>1</sup>What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? <sup>2</sup>For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup>For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ <sup>4</sup>Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. <sup>5</sup>But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Romans 4:1-5).

The context of this passage is significant. Paul was writing to contrast the wrath of God (Romans 1:18-3:20) with the righteousness of God (Romans 3:21-31). Since all mankind is under the wrath of God, the need to be declared righteous is universal (Romans 3:23). The method by which mankind is then saved is through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ (Romans 3:24-25). Therefore the redemptive work of Jesus Christ must apply to all through faith, rather than in the keeping of the Law.

Chapter 4 of Romans is the test case for this argument. Paul selected Abram, a person all Jews would look to as an example of righteousness. And Paul argues that righteousness was credited to Abram because he believed God, not because he did any meritorious work of the Law. Paul’s point is that the text does not say “and Abram believed God and this *earned* him righteousness.” Righteousness was imputed to Abram as a result of his faith, not because he had merited it by some human work. Abram could not boast because he had not earned anything. His righteousness was a gift from God.

Paul expounds this argument to include Gentiles in his letter to the church in Galatia.

“<sup>6</sup>Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. <sup>7</sup>Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. <sup>8</sup>The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘all the nations will be blessed in you.’ <sup>9</sup>So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer” (Galatians 3:6-9).

Again the point is that all mankind have sinned and therefore all need to be made righteous. That cannot happen through the Law, since the Law did not apply to Gentiles. Only through the work of Jesus Christ can all mankind be considered righteous.

Yet, this righteousness is not without works. As James wrote,

“<sup>20</sup>But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? <sup>21</sup>Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? <sup>22</sup>You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; <sup>23</sup>and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘and Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ and he was called the friend of God. <sup>24</sup>You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:20-24).

Here is where Christians have struggled. Some have read this text by James to mean that it was the works of Abram that justified him. But that is not at all the point James is making. James is not arguing that it was Abram’s faith *plus* his works that led to his salvation. Rather, it is that Abram’s faith was *validated* by his works. In other words, since Abram’s faith resulted in good works, Abram’s faith was genuine, saving faith. So, Abram’s obedience was not the cause of his being declared righteous, but his obedience was proof of his saving faith. His works gave evidence that his faith was not mere words alone. His works proved his faith.

### **Takeaways**

As we have seen before, we err when we try to take what the Bible clearly says and modify it to mean something else. In the act of Creation, a “day” is a day. In the time of Noah, the flood that destroyed the “whole” earth destroyed the whole earth. And here, when Scripture clearly states that Abram “believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” it means that Abram was counted righteous or, in the language of the New Testament, Abram was “saved” because of his faith. To be sure Abram demonstrated that his faith was genuine by the works he would do, but his salvation was exclusively the work of God in graciously considering Abram’s *belief* as saving faith.

Let us rejoice in this vital doctrine of our faith. The fact that we are saved by grace through faith ought to be a point of great rejoicing among believers. If good works were required, none of us would be saved. By God’s grace we are free from having to earn our salvation. Let us rejoice in that and live according to God’s Word not to earn our salvation but in gratitude for it.