

Genesis 15:1-6 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 will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." ⁴ And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very 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 offspring be." ⁶ And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

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Genesis 15:1-6 | Righteousness by Faith

As we've been looking at the story of Abram we've seen that all of the drama unfolds around his relationship to the promises that God has made toward Abram. God has promised Abram offspring and land for his offspring to dwell in, but these promises have been threatened by the infertility of the land, and by the infertility of Abram and his wife. Last week we saw Abram avoid the temptation of ambition to take his place among the kings of the world through an unjust war, and instead he remains faithful to the call of God.

The particulars were that he was offered a deal from the king of Sodom, which would gain him great wealth and standing among the other kings. Likewise it would give him some natural alliance to potentially protect him against the nations from whom he rescued his nephew. Instead, Abram steps back into the unsettled nomadic life that God has placed him in, back into all of the vulnerability that comes from being a man without a present country or ally. Abram has been promised a land, but hasn't received it, he has been promised a son but hasn't received one. And now in all the sojourning that God has called him too he is more vulnerable than ever.

Often times we think, life would be so much simpler if I were like a character in the Bible and I was just told directly by God what to do. But then you look closely at a life like Abram's, who receives directly the promises of God, and it actually looks like his life is a lot like ours. Complicated. A lot of ins and outs and what have you.

But Abram provides us with a model for how he is able to keep moving through all the complexity life is throwing at him and in this section we see it grounded in that most fundamental of Christian virtues, faith. Abram believes the Lord.

1. The Goodness of the Lord

Genesis 15:1 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."

The word of the Lord comes to Abram in a vision. The way God reveals himself is varied, but we see here that even the vision, which is sight, communicates the word of the Lord to Abram. He tells Abram to not fear. God asserts that he will be a shield to Abram, and Abram's reward will be very great.

What is happening here? In this interaction I want you to see into the very heart of God towards his servants. Abram has been on quite a ride, and after last week's episode, is realizing the true depth of his vulnerability as a sojourner who has recently involved himself in the wars of the region but denied any alliances with the other kingdoms. He is hard pressed, and God comes to his hard pressed servant to cheer him up.

He says, don't be afraid, he reminds him of his presence, God even lifts his head towards the future and says your reward will be great. This is typical of God in scripture, to come to his people after a difficult time and comfort their hearts. In Acts 23 Paul is almost torn apart by a mob of pharisees and God comes to him that night, and says to take courage. In John 9, when the blind man that Jesus healed is cast out of the synagogue for proclaiming Christ, Jesus goes and finds him to comfort him. After Jesus is tempted in the desert angels come and minister to him. When Elijah is burnt out after a death threat that sends him over the edge, God sends an angel to give him food and a nap.

Look out for these moments in your life? I have experienced this pattern many times. And I also want to encourage you if you are in the midst of a difficult season, or a long journey with apparently no end, God will provide you with what you need to keep going. If you take notes write that down.

But this promise of God, drives Abram to a deeper question.

2. The Specificity of the Promise

Genesis 15:2-3 But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir."

At first glance this may look like a lack of faith for Abram, but it's just the opposite. Abram is pressing right into the very promise that God had given him at the beginning when he called him out of his home and his father's house. God promised a son and an heir, and Abram is asking, where is he?

Abram is saying, "I believe, help my unbelief." The question for Abram is that he doesn't have a son, so is it perhaps that the heir and offspring that God intends to work through is merely a loyal servant in his household? God speaks directly to this doubt.

Genesis 15:4 And behold, the word of the Lord came to him:
 "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall
 be your heir."

"Out of thine own bowls," the King James has it. God speaks directly to the concern that was weighing on Abram's heart.

Abram's question is particular and is met by God with a particular reassurance. You see it is a question that comes from faith and therefore leads to more faith. The reason that many of our questions don't lead to more faith is because they aren't from faith. Am I just talking in circles?

No, rather I'm acknowledging the reality of faith as the absolute foundational starting point for any understanding of God, and therefore as the absolute starting point for any understanding of anything.

If you go on a walk through the neighborhood I live in, about every fifth house you'll see a yard sign with a creed on it. We aren't the only ones that recite creeds, our neighbors do as well. It's about five foundational beliefs that guide a modern secular ethic, and it begins with the phrase, "in this house we believe," and one of the things on that list is "science is real." This is one of those instances where someone accidentally shows their hand.

We tend to think of true knowledge of reality to be in this realm of science. But what do we mean when we talk about science? Well, perhaps the explanation of the mechanisms that are in play when a ball falls out of your hand and hits the floor. The explanation of this mechanism always takes place within a world of faith. For a brief sketch. Aristotle thought that the world was being pulled forward towards its purpose, and therefore when a ball fell out of your hand it was not acted upon by gravity, but was rather pulled towards its purpose, driven by its essence. It is made of earth therefore goes towards the earth. The faith claim brought to the observation informs the observation. Newton on the other hand did not view things in terms of essence and purpose, but cause and effect. The ball is acted on by gravity as an object in space. Einstein shifts this once again and considers that when we throw the ball at the speed of light, time and space change. And then quantum theory assumes I don't know what.

Here's my point, the scientific deduction that we make based upon the observation depends upon the faith assumptions that we bring to it. In order for you to ask questions of science, you first have to believe in it. This is what it means to be human. And that is foundational to our understanding of what it means to know God. It begins in faith and ends in faith.

Discovering a law of science is not like discovering God because discovering God is discovering not something, but someone. Abram says, I believe your promise God, help me believe your promise, God answers him directly, but then shows him something so much more.

Genesis 15:5 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 offspring be."

God gives to Abram a sign by simply having him look up into the night's sky. As innumerable as the stars, so will Abram's offspring be. The sign didn't prove anything to Abram, but served as a visual representation of the certainty and glory of God's promise to him. As sure as the stars are fixed in the sky so are Abram's offspring promised to him. As glorious and uncountable as the stars is the scope of God's promise to Abram.

God had earlier told Abram that his offspring will be as innumerable as the dust of the earth, and now he says they are as innumerable as the stars in the sky. If Abram looks down to his feet he sees the promise of God, and if Abram looks up into the sky he sees the promise of God. He is being given the true paradigm of existence which shows us that all things are upheld by the word of God. From this place of faith, he is able to look out with questions guided by faith towards greater faith. And here we see Abram's response of faith.

3. Righteousness of Faith

Genesis 15:6 And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

This is perhaps one of the most important verses in scripture. Abram believed the Lord's promise to him and the Lord counts his belief as righteousness.

What is the whole problem of humanity? Romans 3:23 "For all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God." We are all unrighteous. We are born into sin and we continue in agreement with sin. We constantly seek to exist in ways that deny God as our creator and sustainer to whom we owe everything. We deny the goodness of God, and we craft stories of existence which make him unnecessary, and moral codes which deny his good intentions and revelation.

God cannot tell a lie. He cannot call good what is bad. But here God counts righteousness unto Abram only because Abram believed the Lord. Here is the unspeakable hope and offer of the promises of God, they become ours simply by believing them. Hear Paul in his letter to the Romans explain the centrality of faith in our salvation.

Romans 4:3-5 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a

gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,

How is this possible. It is possible because God is looking forward to the fulfillment of the gift that he has promised Abraham. That through his offspring the whole world would be blessed. And this offspring is Jesus Christ. The Son of God who came into the world to take on the punishment of death for our sins, so that we might receive his righteousness by faith alone.

All of being a Christian is summed up in trusting the promise of God, that we see brought to fruition in the life death resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. That when he says I Am the way and the truth and the life, we believe him. And when we believe him we are saved and he shows himself to us.

I know one of you is an aeronautical engineer, so this analogy isn't for you. But for others, especially those on the edge of calling yourself a Christian. Do you know how a plane works? The mechanisms undergirding the shape of the wing, the lift, the thrust, and pitch and yaw. The chemistry of a jet engine? No. But you'll fly in a plane for a cousin's wedding during COVID.

Many of you are standing on the outside of the plane of Christ piecing together questions and answers, and he says I'll explain it to you once you're on the plane. Wait until you feel this sucker take off, then you'll know it really works. But it's so much more than trusting a plane. This is trusting the promises of the one who has already given up his life for you, so that you might come to him in righteousness. And in order to receive that righteousness you need only believe him. Believe him, and be righteous.