

## “The Struggle Of Faith And The Source Of Confidence”

*How does God respond to the doubts and fears of people who claim to believe in Him? Some non-religious people celebrate doubt as if it is intellectually sophisticated to always be in doubt about most things. For some people, cynicism is always cooler than conviction. One problem with that is you can only doubt everything if you are willing to doubt your doubts. That means being open to the idea that underneath a lot of skepticism lie all kinds of prejudices. Some doubt is just close-minded and unwilling to consider the idea of trusting in something which, remains mysterious and beyond your control. Doubt in itself isn't really something to celebrate. But doubt isn't always something to condemn either. Some religious people condemn doubt as inexcusable weakness. When you create an atmosphere like that, you suggest that you cannot be intellectually authentic and also a good Christian. Sure there is a kind of doubt that is thrown up like a rebellious challenge but what about honest struggles? What we learn in the Bible is that even the greatest believers struggle with doubts. What we need to ask is, How does God respond when we have doubts and fears?*

*What this part of Abram's story shows us is that...*

### **I. GOD RESPONDS TO OUR FEARS WITH COMPASSION.**

**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."* In **Genesis 12** God called Abram to leave everything he knew and go to a land that God would show him. God promised to bless Abram and the whole world through him. Abram's faith has been tested. God has been proven faithful to him again and again.

*And yet what we see in Abram, who is described in the Bible as a champion amongst believers, is that ...*

### **A. Even gold-medal believers have to battle fear.**

**Genesis 15:1** begins with the words: *After these things.* What is it referring to? Well in a previous episode (chapter) Abram's nephew Lot had been captured by four warlord kings. Abram, at this point, has over 300 men under him. He organizes a pursuit, divides his forces, attacks at night, wins the battle and saves the hostages. The king of Sodom offers him a great reward for saving so many people, but

Abram turns it down. He wants to acknowledge only God as his source of blessing. So *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."*

Perhaps Abram is like a man who takes a courageous stand for principle in the workplace and in the afterglow of victory worries about job security. Abram won a battle, but made some enemies. He rejected a huge reward because he wanted to rely on God alone. Now, perhaps he wonders, was it really necessary to make that speech about not taking so much as a sandal strap off the king of Sodom? The point is the human heart is vulnerable to doubt and fear and even after great victories doubts and fears can creep right back into our hearts. It is important to know that we will struggle and God is compassionate.

*Even gold-medal believers have to battle fear and...*

### **B. The struggle with fear does not easily surrender to faith.**

**Verse 1** says, *The Word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision.* If God showed up to you in a clear and powerful vision and said to you: *Fear not! I'm your shield; your reward will be very great.* How would you respond? I wonder. Would you say, "Great?". *All I really wanted was a little reassurance. I'm good now.* If Abram is supposed to teach us, then it seems that what he shows us is that our hearts have a congenital spiritual defect. We were made for faith but we are vulnerable to fear, and we suffer from persistent doubts. It's as if the Word of God coming to him, instead of setting Abram at ease opens the door to his heart and out spills his doubt! **Verse 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?"* Abram goes on about how he thinks God's promises are not being fulfilled and God's plan isn't working out. So in **verse 5** God took Abram 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."*

**Genesis 15:6** says: *And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.* That is an important verse in the Bible. It is quoted in the New Testament in Roman, Galatians, and in James because it shows that righteousness in God's eyes, has always been through faith. Faith is how we begin our life with God. Faith is how we continue in our life with God. But look at what happens in **verse 7** and **8**, God says, *"I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the*

*Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.”<sup>8</sup> But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” How am I to know. That's our question, isn't it?*

When I was a new Christian, I was full of faith, but my faith was untested. I let go of things, people, and places that were familiar to me and launched myself in a new direction that was unfamiliar. I had what I thought was great faith. That did not last. The God who calls us into a life of faith wants our faith to develop for our good and his glory. But for faith to be developed it has to be stretched beyond its present state and strength. So God exposes us to challenges that require us to go farther into a life of faith in him. Anything worth believing is worth doubting. What that means is it is worth fighting through the discomfort born of doubt to come to the place of deeper faith.

*In all of this God responds to our fears with compassion and...*

## **II. GOD RESPONDS TO OUR FEARS WITH COMMITMENT.**

In response to Abram's question, *How can I know?* God tells him to pull together a petting zoo! **Verse 9-10** He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” God didn't tell Abram what to do next. We might not know what's going on here, but it is clear that Abram understands. He knows exactly what to do. **Verse 10** says, *And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half.* What we know from other Scripture<sup>1</sup> and from studies of the ancient world is that God is about to make a covenant commitment to Abram.

*This ceremony that follows teaches us three things each of which is designed to encourage us to fight our fears with faith in God.*

### **A. God's commitment is expressed in a solemn covenant.**

***In the Bible and in many cultures and societies today solemn commitments are made symbolically.*** There is at least one couple in our church who got married in a **Greek Orthodox wedding ceremony**. In the Greek Orthodox wedding service, the covenant of marriage is made without any spoken vows. The couple exchanges rings, they are crowned with two flowered crowns attached to each other with white ribbons, they share a common cup of wine, then they walk around a table on which are set the bible and the cross to symbolize their first steps as husband and wife are centered on Christ

and his Word. When the ceremony is completed, the marriage covenant has been made. Its all done symbolically.

***Abraham understood that when God said to get these animals they were about to make a solemn covenant commitment through an act of powerful symbolism.*** The way a covenant was made is that animals would be sacrificed, cut into pieces, and an aisle would be made. The people making the covenant would walk together between the severed halves of the animals and what they were saying is *“May I be cut in two if I fail to keep this covenant that I make today.”* It was a solemn, binding, covenant commitment in which you made yourself accountable to suffer the covenant curse if you failed to fulfill your promise. God is saying, *“You want to know how you can know that you can trust me? Here's my answer, If I do not fulfill my promises to you may my immortality suffer mortality, may I be cut apart and destroyed.”* God is making his commitment absolutely clear.

Once I was walking the shoreline of a lake in a remote national forest. I was begging God for reassurance about an issue with which I was struggling. Suddenly the words from an old hymn came to mind. The Hymn is titled, *How Firm a Foundation*. In one line God is speaking. It says, *“What more can I say than to you I have said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?”* I realized at that moment that God has said it all over and over, and clearly and emphatically. What I needed was not more reassurance but the willingness to fight fear with faith. ***You have to fight your fears with faith in God because the things that matter most of all do not depend on you at all.***

*God's commitment is expressed in a solemn covenant. Second*  
**B. God's commitment is secured by his absolute sovereignty.**

**Verse 12** says, *As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. In verses 13-16* God speaks to Abram in his sleep. He says, *Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs (Egypt) and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward, they shall come out with great possessions. 15 As for you, 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. The point is you do not know cannot control the future. God does and God can, and God will shape all

things to fulfill his covenant with his people. ***You have to fight your fears with faith in God because the things that matter most of all do not depend on you at all.***

*Here's what you can count on: God's solemn covenant and his absolute sovereignty and God's gracious faithfulness...*

**C. God's commitment rests entirely on his own faithfulness.**

**Verse 17-18** says: *When the sun had gone down, and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.* <sup>18</sup> *On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring, I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates. **The smoking firepot with a blazing torch is a symbol of God's presence.*** On a larger scale, this is the way that God revealed His presence to His people when he led them out of slavery in Egypt. An intense streak of gleaming fire, appears and holds its shape. It is wrapped in a blanket of smoke as if to shield the people from its blinding splendor. In this story, this fire wrapped in smoke moves down the aisle formed by the severed animals.

***The remarkable thing to see is that God moves alone, without Abram, through the severed sacrifices.*** Abram is still in a deep sleep. There is only one thing this can mean. God makes the promise in the covenant completely one-sided. God says: *"If I fail to keep my promises I will pay the consequences and if you fail I will still pay the penalty and bear the covenant curse and still fulfill the promise."*

**Imagine someone getting married** and saying listen; I'm not going to exchange vows with you, I'm just going to make vows to you. You aren't going to promise anything. I'm going to make all the promises, and I'm going to keep every one of them no matter what.

***Does that mean God will keep his promises to us no matter what we do? Yes, it does.*** Don't misunderstand; God will discipline you when you disobey him. That's part of his promise. He will teach you and purify your life and faith. If you are happy disobeying him and that's what you prefer to do, that means you don't really know Him at all. Maybe you have never experienced the new birth Jesus said was essential to entering into a covenant relationship with God. You need to truly turn to Christ and trust in him. Ask him to give you the change of heart Jesus calls being born again. You will discover that spiritual birth will bring with it a sincere desire to not only trust in him for your

soul's salvation but to follow and honor him in all of life. That's part of his promise.

## CONCLUSION

The moment you truly turn to Christ as your Lord and trust in him as your Savior the Bible teaches that God enters into a covenant relationship with you. His covenant commitment shines throughout the Scriptures in many life-giving promises.

- *I will forgive your sins and remember them no more.*<sup>2</sup>
- *I will give you the gift of eternal life and heaven itself.*<sup>3</sup>
- *I will continually show you my grace and my mercy, my patience and my loving kindness.*<sup>4</sup>
- *I will give you my Spirit and my Word to guard you and guide you into paths of life that will bless you.*<sup>5</sup>
- *I will promise work all things together for good in your life.*<sup>6</sup>
- *Nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.*<sup>7</sup>

A fascinating study was done utilizing an MRI to examine the brain functions of married women and cohabiting women when facing stress. Researches gave both sets of women uncomfortable electric shocks. For support they were given three choices: hold the hand of their partners, hold the hand of a stranger, or face the shock alone. When a married woman held the hand of her husband, she registered a deep calm in the hypothalamus region of her brain as she prepared for the shock. But the unmarried women even when holding the hand of a live-in partner registered *no* measurable calming effect. What surprised the researchers was that both sets of women stated that they felt commitment from their partners. But when tested the cohabiting women holding the hands of their live-in partners registered no difference from women holding the hand of a stranger. What the researches speculate is that in spite of saying they feel commitment from their partners, for the unmarried women doubt resides in the deepest part of their brains.<sup>8</sup> And of course, we would add, their souls. Why share that story? Not primarily to advocate for marriage – though I do. But to make the point that where commitment matters - covenant matters. God has made a covenant with his people. He has clearly communicated this in stories like this one, in multiple Scriptures, in sacraments like baptism and the Lord's Supper. He wants all who believe in Jesus to know that he has bound himself to us – to you – to us together as his church, the community of covenant people and we can count on him to keep his covenant commitments. Know that.

The ultimate proof of that is Jesus. ***Centuries after God made this covenant with Abraham there was a dramatic moment when a dreadful darkness came down on the earth again.***

When Jesus was crucified darkness came down and engulfed the cross. What was happening? **Galatians 3:13-14** Jesus Christ took all the curses we deserve on himself on the cross. Just as Abram believed God's promises and God counted it to him for righteousness when you believe in God's promises about Jesus, when you turn to him and trust in him God counts you as righteous in his eyes and brings you into an everlasting covenant of grace full of life-giving promises. ***You have to fight your fears with faith in God because the things that matter most of all do not depend on you at all.***

From **Genesis 15:1** The word of the Lord to all of his people is this: *"Fear not...I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."* That's not a word to take lightly. It's God's covenant commitment. *"Fear not...I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."*

## **Amen**

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 34:18

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 103:12, Hebrews 8:12

<sup>3</sup> John 3:16, 6:47, 14:1-3

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 23

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 19, 119, John 7:37-39

<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:28-30

<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:31-39

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.livescience.com/43401-marry-cohabite-brain-differences.html>