

Given and Guaranteed  
Genesis 15

Probably everyone here or most everyone has learned how to ride a bike or you plan to learn. In recent years, I helped each of my daughters learn how. And of course they began with the training wheels, but eventually, the time came to remove those so they could learn how to balance.

Like many parents, I would run alongside them and hold the back of the seat to steady them, letting go at times so they could get a feel for balancing on their own. Always there was fear, and some crying; from the girls, not me, of course!

But I noticed something with each one. Even once I would let go, they would still want me there. They needed reassurance that I would catch them if they fell.

In a similar way, those who walk by faith need reassurance from God that He will carry us. We waver in our faith, and so we waver also in our obedience. And in doing so, we sin against God.

But in Christ, God remains faithful to His people, even as we waver. Jesus secures us. The apostle Paul speaks to this reality in Colossians 3 where he writes, *“For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”*

Those who trust in Jesus essentially participated with Him in His death on the cross, and were raised with Him at His resurrection. So we should rest in God’s faithfulness and renew our efforts to walk by faith and obey.

But how has God assured us of His faithfulness? How can we be sure? This is the question that Abram asks in Genesis 15, and God does not get frustrated. Actually, He kindly and definitively answers.

We have two assurances, which you can see listed in the outline on pages 6-7 in the WG. God has given the promise of His covenant faithfulness, and He has guaranteed the promise of His covenant faithfulness.

Now last week, at the end of Genesis 14, we saw Abram choose faith over sight. Notice verse 1 says, *“After these things.”* That is, after Abram demonstrated faith, honoring the king of Salem and rejecting the king of Sodom. Moses then says, *“the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision.”*

This describes a prophetic experience given to Abram by God. The language used tells us that this is a message for the people of God. It is *“the Word of Yahweh.”* God says, *“Fear not, Abram, I am your shield.”* God is Abram’s protector.

From what? Perhaps those he defeated. Often, when you win battles, you make enemies. Or the prophetic vision itself may have been frightening to see.

God then says, *“your reward shall be very great.”* The “reward” seems to refer to God’s original covenant promises in Genesis 12. God said, *“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. [3] I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*

Abram knows these promises, but he is struggling. Walking by faith is often difficult. See verse [2], *“But Abram said, “O Lord GOD.”* He acknowledges the sovereignty of God, but then notice his reply: *“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.”* Eliezer was likely a servant in Abram’s house; not a blood relative, but one whom he loved and trusted.

Abram is disappointed. Do you know the feeling of believing but struggling to continue? Do you know what it’s like to keep striving to hold on while seeing no end in sight? You are not alone. You are in the company of even the great Abraham.

Verse 4, God replies; again, a prophetic declaration, *“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.”* God says the heir will be a biological son. This is a further clarification of the promise, along with a symbol given by God. Verse [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.”*

Words are powerful. They can do good or harm. Throughout the Scriptures, a person’s word is held in very high regard. Your word is your bond. People can break their word though; but with God, His Word is truly enough. It’s hard for us to walk by faith, but His promises are sure.

All that God has promised, He will do. This is why it is so important to understand what God promises actually are.

God has given the promise of His covenant faithfulness to His people. He has committed to dwell with us, that He will be our God and we will be His people. He promises to never leave us nor forsake us, and to forgive our sins and make us whole. He has committed to make all things new on the last day at the Judgment of Jesus Christ.

Some promises have been fulfilled, some in part, some remain unfulfilled completely, and so the righteous must live by faith. But God does promise to strengthen and sustain us as we remain in the covenant and renew our efforts to remain in the covenant. Through His Word, through the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and through prayer, God strengthens His people in a real way.

What promises must you cling to today? Do you know that there is a sense in which our worship service on the Lord's Day is a covenant renewal event? We gather here; God reminds us and reassures us; and we repent, receive the truth, and renew our efforts to walk by faith and to obey Him.

And look at verse 6, *"And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness."* God basically clarifies and reiterates His promise to Abram, but it bolsters Abram's faith. What we see here is justification by faith alone, because you see, human faith would not inherently make Abram righteous. God credited righteousness to Abram by grace alone; it was unmerited and unearned. God knows what we are made of, and so not only has God given the promise, but He has guaranteed the promise.

In verse 7, God declares who He is and what He has done for Abram. God had already led him, blessed Him, provided for Him, given Him help and victory. And here God reaffirms the promise of the land. But in verse [8], Abram asks for a sign. *"He said, 'O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?'"*

The wicked Canaanites were currently on the land. But what happens next is fundamental to our understanding of salvation; it is fundamental to Christianity. It is essential for the reassurance of Abram and his descendants, all the way to this day. This ancient ceremony, which may appear to you as archaic and grotesque, was the ritual for ratifying a covenant agreement in that part of the world at that time.

Archeologists have uncovered loads of evidence for what is called the suzerain-vassal treaty. It was an agreement made between two nations. You could call it a "big nation/small nation treaty." The suzerain or sovereign nation (the big nation) would approach the vassal (or small) nation with terms of peace that required the submission of the smaller nation. And with the covenant, there were blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. The small nation would have to agree or face the consequences.

Verses 9-11 describes animals killed, cut in half (except for the birds), and laid in two rows. Then God causes a deep sleep to come over Abram. This is the same wording used to describe the sleep God caused to come over Adam when Eve was created. And Abram experiences the terrifying presence of the living God.

Notice verse [13] *Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs 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."*

This is the prophecy of the bondage and delivery of the Israelites from Egypt. Scholars note that this establishes the nation of Israel as "the people of the covenant." God tells Abram that he will

grow old and pass away, so he will not see this fulfilled completely. But his descendants will take the land. "Amorites" is another name for the Canaanites. God would judge them eventually, but it would be a while before that time would come.

Now again, this is God's Word, which is enough. But the LORD goes further, and guarantees the promise of His covenant faithfulness. With this ancient ritual, it was customary for the kings of the big nation and the small nation to pass together between the rows of dead, bloody animals, each vowing that if they did not keep their side of the treaty, may what happened to those animals happen to them. May they keep their word or die!

But there is a difference in God's covenant promise. Look at verse [17] *"When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces."* These were symbols of God's holy presence. Notice that God alone passes between the dead animals. By doing so, He indicates that He accepts responsibility for both sides of the agreement.

Humans give guarantees because we know that we can default on our word or break our agreements. God doesn't need to provide a guarantee. But in His mercy and grace, He accommodates us and does this for His people. And *"On that day"* verse 18 says, *"the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your offspring I give this land.'*" And the groups currently in the Promised Land at that time are listed.

We know that Abram and his descendants did not and could not perfectly keep the covenant. In fact, Abram falters shortly after this. But God assures Abram by guaranteeing His promise of covenant faithfulness.

This is foundational for our understanding of the cross of Jesus Christ. This is an Old Covenant precedent of God's commitment to keep both sides of the covenant, even unto death. And we see this at the cross of Jesus Christ.

There, God the Son absorbed a bloody death in our place, for our covenant breaking. There Jesus Christ, who was fully God and fully man, paid in full the penalty due for our violations of God's covenant. And in doing so, Jesus ratified the new covenant.

Ligonier's TableTalk magazine explains the Genesis 15 ritual this way: *"By this act, God showed that the covenant would achieve its purposes no matter what. Our obedience is not unimportant, but we are sinners and fail regularly, so the Lord alone can keep the covenant perfectly. He does the work—through Christ—to reckon us obedient to the covenant of works that we broke, and He does it entirely by grace."*

We have the Word of Christ, and we have the cross of Christ. Are these enough for you?

Are they enough today for you to renew your commitment to walk by faith and obey?

Are they enough for you to repent of your sin and receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord?

Receive the promise by faith!

Let's bow together in prayer.