

## ***How Can I Know?*** **Genesis 15:7-21**

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We begin our text today picking up in the middle of the chapter in Genesis 15. We'll read from verse 7 through the end in verse 21 but, before we do, I want to remind you of the immediate context.

God has called Abram from his land, his house, and his family to serve him and to follow him into a land that he did not know. He did it. He brought with him his nephew, Lot, and his wife, Sarai, and they've made their way through danger and sword by the Lord's help. Yet, even though God has been with Abram and his family, it's somewhat unclear as to how God will do what he said in Genesis 12, to make him a great nation, to bless him and make his name great, and to bless the nations through him.

In the beginning of our chapter, God has approached Abram and reassured him that he will have a son even in his old age. He then took Abram outside, showed him the starry sky, and promised that his offspring would be as numerous as these. So, we are told, Abram believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness. However, while that may be the most well-known part of this chapter, the account goes on. Abram still has questions. He still has problems that he cannot solve on his own. And so it's in this passage that we find both darkness and bright hope, the true problem at hand and God's gracious answer. But before we read our text, let's ask God's help in prayer:

*Gracious God, you are the Lord and Giver of Life. You tell us that man cannot live by bread alone but by every word which proceeds from your mouth. So as we approach your word, we ask that you would fulfill your promise, that it would accomplish your purpose in feeding us. So use this word to convict and comfort, guide and strengthen. Give life as you speak, O Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen.*

When I was about 15, I started seriously lifting weights with my high school football team. As such, being a young boy in that tender age and in that market bracket, I started to pay attention to and notice more advertising for supplements, specifically for protein shakes. Maybe some of y'all can relate, male or female,

because as I started this journey of getting interested in fitness, I'd see these commercials with yoked up guys slugging down protein powder concoctions and the unspoken implication was powerful for me. Drink this and you'll look like that. Easy. Fast forward a few weeks because it took some time to convince my parents to buy some protein powder for me, but once I finally had that tub in my hand, oh boy, we were about to start cooking with gas. As I sipped, convincing myself of its power and palatability, I pictured how amazed everyone would be. I would be strong, I would be fast, I would be lean. The world was about to meet a new Colton.

Fast forward again about a month to the end of that tub of protein and reality began to set in. I was, all things considered, relatively unchanged. Meager increases at best, but it was nothing compared to what I was envisioning, to what I saw in those commercials. Even though the supplement companies weren't explicitly saying that I would look like those yoked-up guys, I felt duped. The promise was too good to be true. The reality was that it takes a lot more hard work and time to look anything remotely like that.

Maybe you can think of a time when you believed a promise that seemed too good to be true and then got burned by it. Perhaps it was a money-making scheme that seemed surefire until it collapsed beneath you. Maybe it was a particular parenting technique that had advocates swearing up and down that it would produce obedient, good, kind little boys and girls who love the Lord. Perhaps it was a family member wrestling with addiction that seemed like they'd finally found freedom before finding out the unfortunate truth beneath. Perhaps you're still wrestling with something like that. It shouldn't be any surprise for us, then, that some of the things God promises Abram — and us — seem too good to be true. We might nod in agreement that God works all things for good, that he'll never leave us nor forsake us, that he will never run out of forgiving, pardoning grace, but deep down we wonder. "That sounds a bit too good to be true."

That's exactly where we find Abram in this passage. He's done as God said. He left his land, his house, his family, and the gods of that land to serve God in the land he would show to him. However, still childless and aging fast, Abram is wondering exactly how the whole blessing and great nation thing is going to work out. One major reason he's wrestling is the fact that he's old and he doesn't have an heir. How is he supposed to bless the nations and to *be* a great nation when he has no son? But it's not just that, God has also promised him a land. As yet, Abram doesn't really possess a single square foot of that land. He's left virtually everything behind, been obedient to God for the most part, but his circumstances

just don't gel with what he thinks God will or ought to do. And so, he asks God, "how am I to know?" In other words, he can't see how God will make all this happen because his situation seems so foreign to what he might expect from God. Don't you feel a kinship with Abram here? God is making some astounding promises, promises that push the boundaries of belief and, while we're told that Abram believes God, that faith does not negate the presence of doubt. He still wonders, "how can I know?"

The first thing I want you to see is just how amazing it is that this question comes right after Abram believing the Lord and being counted as righteous. Please don't miss this. There's a temptation to think in moments of sincere doubt that a lack of faith is being shown in that doubt. While in some cases that may be true, for every Christian the reality of doubt and struggle remains. Being a justified believer does not make doubt an impossibility, it makes it an inevitability. Why? Because there are certain things that God knows we cannot see, cannot grasp with our two hands, may not see the answers to in our lifetime. Only someone seeking to trust in those things will wrestle and doubt.

Have you not been here? When in times of isolation, betrayal, and abandonment you honestly wonder about the truth that God will never leave nor forsake you? When in seasons of backsliding and continuous sin you ask if God really could forgive you again? When everything around you seems to be falling apart and the promise of God to work all things for good for those who love him seems utterly ridiculous, like some child's fairytale? Sweet, but completely beyond belief.

Brothers and sisters, you have doubted, who have felt the prayer of the father with an afflicted child in Mark 9 to be your own, saying with tears, "Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief," take note of how the Lord answers Abram's doubt. He does not answer with anger or impatience. He does not answer with, "how dare you question me? I'm God!" No, God's response for Abram is an ever flowing stream of patience and kindness. If God can so handle Abram's doubts, David's doubts, Jeremiah's doubts, his own Son's wrestling in the Garden of Gethsemane, he can hear and handle yours. Take them to him.

But notice specifically how God responds because this is where our passage gets either really good or really weird. Perhaps both! He commands Abram to do something utterly foreign and strange to us. He takes several animals in verse 9 and following and, for all but the small birds, Abram kills them and cuts them in half and sets up their pieces in sort of an aisle shape. Just picture this scene.

Here's Abram, God has told him to gather these animals, and Abram's done that and now he's just sitting there and waiting. Waiting so long, in fact, that he has to drive off birds who want a free meal. Still waiting, Abram begins to doze and, like the beginning of the chapter, he has another vision. We're told that a "dreadful and great darkness fell upon him," which refers to the sort of spiritual vertigo that results from a sinner being in the presence of the holy and encountering supernatural things. In this vision, God meets with Abram and answers his question by pointing ahead to his people's slavery in Egypt and subsequent Exodus. Okay, that's nice.

Now Abram seems to wake up after that in verse 17 and it's now totally dark, the sun is down. Then, suddenly, out of the midst of this darkness comes something strange: a smoking fire pot and a blazing torch. These two objects are moving, though. Moving in the midst of the dead animals. And from this strange scene, the voice of the Lord comes again, restating the promise to give the land to /Abram's descendants.

Admittedly, this scene strikes us strangely. You and I very rarely are party to the death of animals unless that's involved in our profession. Even if we are, it's either to kill a pest or to procure food. This is neither. What's happening here, as Abram takes these five animals and splits the larger ones in two is something the original audience would have immediately recognized. This is a covenant ceremony, which is why often the literal verb that accompanies the making of a covenant in Scripture is "to cut" a covenant. The covenant you and I are probably most familiar with in life is the covenant made in marriage. The bridegroom and the bride walk down an aisle and make vows. Something similar is happening here, but even greater. For one thing, like we've acknowledged, death is involved. Animals have to die for this bond, contract, this covenant to be made with Abram and God. Not only does death necessarily need to take place for any life to be sustained in the fallen world, the death and cutting in two of these animals was symbolic of the covenantal curse. The implied meaning for the two parties involved in the covenant was, "may my fate be like these animals if I do not hold up my end of the bargain. May I be totally cut off."

So it was that the two parties in the covenant, usually a stronger and a weaker (a suzerain or ruler and a vassal or subject), would walk the aisle together as part of their bond, similar to walking the aisle in a marriage covenant. However, in this case, the only one we see passing through the aisle is God, here represented as he is later on Mount Sinai in smoke and blazing fire. What's the deal, then? God's

answer to Abram's doubt is to cut a covenant with him and, in doing so, the promises he gives to Abram he swears by himself. Have you noticed how, when someone is attempting to attest to the truth of their vows, that they swear by some higher authority? We swear on the Bible to tell the whole truth. Perhaps less tastefully, some folks colloquially might swear by someone's grave. We intuitively know that these sorts of oaths mean something. The author of the book of Hebrews takes notice of this and points out that God can swear by no higher authority. So what does he do? He swears by himself. He promises, on the basis of his inability to lie and his unchanging character, that he will be true to his promises. That's part of what's happening here, but it's not everything.

But let's be honest, that doesn't necessarily answer all the problems you have when you doubt. "Thanks, God, for promising me something I can't see or understand by something else I can't really see or perfectly understand." Why doesn't God restating the promise and swearing by himself end the problem? Because the problem of doubt goes much deeper. Those surface doubts are doubts with respect to God. "How can I know that you won't fail me?" But the reality is that our greater and more difficult-to-answer question is, "How can I know that I won't fail you?"

At bottom, that's why Abram screws up so royally with Hagar in the very next chapter. He and Sarai both wonder if somehow their childlessness is a reflection that they've not fulfilled God's purpose, that they've failed and therefore need to do something to kickstart the process. More than we know, it's the same problem, the same doubt at the bottom of our doubts.

When I feel isolated, I don't so much doubt God staying with me as I do wrestle with the reality that I know I've abandoned him. When I'm coming to him for forgiveness over impatience and selfishness *again*, I don't so much doubt his forgiveness and faithfulness as I do the fact that I know I'll just fail him again. When everything seems to fall apart, I don't so much doubt that he can work things for good as much as I question whether or not I'll just keep screwing it all up. At the root, at the heart of the matter in all our questions and doubts is this: "how can I know that I won't fail you? How can I know that I won't fail me?"

Do you remember who passes through those cloven animals? It's not Abram. It's not you and me. It's God and him alone. God not only swears *by* himself, but more importantly he swears *upon* himself. God in the form of a smoking fire pot and a blazing torch passing through the pieces is his walking down the aisle, swearing to his beloved, "not only will I swear to be cut off if I do not keep my end of the

bargain, I will take the curse when you fail. I will keep both ends. I will go all the way. I will be utterly cut off in your place.” Now this is utterly foreign in all the religions of the world. Scott pointed this out a number of weeks ago in helping us understand that Abram’s everyday before God’s call on his life was the worship of pagan gods. Gods who were cruel, capricious, demanding, and selfish. This God, the true God, is just the opposite.

In a sense, this is merely an expansion of the promise given in Genesis 3:15. The promise of the serpent-crusher, that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent, was not without its danger. In that promise, we are also told that the serpent would strike the heel of the one who would strike his head, a blow from a venomous snake that would have been lethal to the one bitten. In that day, God swore to Adam and Eve that he would solve the problem and bear the curse that they had unleashed. God himself would put death to death, but not without first suffering death himself.

Going on from Genesis 15, the metaphors and word pictures used to describe God’s relentless love for his people flow out from this passage. God is the shepherd who gathers in his flock gone astray. God is the bridegroom who buys back the adulterous bride. God is the father, waiting for the prodigal to come home so that he might run, sweep up his child, and bring him back not as a servant but as a son. None of these pictures work without this, God walking down the aisle alone. Dear ones, maybe you’re wondering that yourself this morning. How can I know that I won’t fail him? How can you know that you could never fully abandon him, never be so far that God could not reach you? He walked down the aisle alone. How can you know that he will work good in your life no matter how much you seem to mess it up and how much brokenness you see? He walked down the aisle alone. How can you know that God will continue to forgive you, to receive you with a hug and a smile and not reject you with a disappointed look after the thousandth time you’ve stumbled in sin? He walked down the aisle alone.

God knew that we could never keep our hold on him, so he has unbreakable fastened his hand to ours. God knew that we would be prone to wander and leave the God we love, so he has sealed our hearts and hemmed us in by his love, a love that will not let us go. God knew that we would doubt and wonder, that we would question and struggle, that we would fall back into sin time and time again, so he did this, he walked down the aisle alone.

Where are you today? What’s your “how can I know?” God’s answer to these questions, as we’re so fond of saying here because it is true, is nothing less than

himself. Nothing less than a God who goes to the cross and the grave for his people. Nothing less than a God who walks down the aisle alone. When your doubts come to you, and they will, fix this image of your mind. For if your God will do this for you, what can separate you from his love?