

Keeping Faith for Both of Us

Genesis 15: 1-18

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One of the most common signs of the cynicism of our age is to say dismissively, “Well, don’t bother talking to God. He doesn’t talk back.” A recent movie which I otherwise quite liked, shows a man on a subway talking to other passengers. He has a soothing voice but looks quite anemic. “I was lost and in the darkness,” he says, “But then I had a talk with God, and the light came to me.” He turns to our main character, who’s having a terrible day, and urges him gently, “Sir, go have a talk with God.” Our main character steps off the train and turns to face the man still inside, “Yeah. Right. I’ll have a talk with God. And you know what! HE WON’T ANSWER!” There we go. A nice slap against pious air heads. But actually a pretty profound truth. Our character was drunk and angry. He had lost a job, messed up his relationship with his daughter and remained estranged from his wife. Talking with God would not magically have cleaned up that mess. It doesn’t work that way.

What stuns me, though, is that people use a scene like that to say, “You see, talking to God is a waste of time. It doesn’t really do anything. That’s because there’s not a God.” As if. As if the proof of God’s existence is that he answers me like a genie in a bottle, giving me just what I ask for. As if a God who created the heavens and the earth, if he did exist, would be here to be my servant when I couldn’t figure out life on my own. I could rub the bottle, get my wish, and then go back to living my life my way. What kind of God would God be if he let me dictate the terms of the relationship? What kind of God who has the power and wisdom to create the universe would be so naïve as to give frail, fallible, self-centered human beings whatever they wanted? And with no expectation of knowing him, relating to him, trusting him or submitting to him?

The Scriptures are all about a God who wants to relate to his creatures. He wants us to know him, and he wants to make himself known to us. He wants to bless us and shower his love and peace and grace in our lives. His love is not based on something we do. But there is, in fact, a condition of *experiencing* God. We have to agree to let God be God. We can’t expect God to adjust himself to our whims. We submit to letting God be who he is. We adjust ourselves to God’s reality. Otherwise, we will never know him. We will be left on our own to solve our lives ourselves. God’s love may be freely given, but it doesn’t come cheap.

We don't get to set the terms. I guess it still surprises me that so much atheism is not really intellectual. It's people shaking defiant fists saying, "Why won't you be like I want you to be!"

At the same time, one of the continuing questions in Genesis is this: can God be trusted? If I acknowledge the God who made the heavens and the earth, how will he handle the offering of my heart? Will he keep his promises? Will he do good to me? There is so much suffering in the world. There are so many delays in the promises. Is it worth trusting God instead of striking out on my own, to try to get what I need right now?

The context of today's story is that Abraham has just returned from a huge military victory over a coalition of regional kings. He has rescued his nephew Lot and retrieved the stolen goods. But just like today, rulers don't like to be humiliated. Revenge is a high value for military strong men. Abraham could expect reprisals. Would the life of the man of promise in the land of promise be cut short by a vicious retaliation?

Into this situation, the word of the LORD came to Abraham, "Fear not Abram. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great." The LORD promised his protecting presence to Abraham. I will shield you from enemies. You declined to take the reward of plunder from the kings. That's fine: I will be your reward, and give you all I need."

Now I think I'd like to have such a vision. I think I would take that divine comfort and say, "Good deal. God is with me. It's going to be fine." But Abraham was not called the man of faith for no reason. And real faith doesn't mean just accepting everything without a word about it to God. Abraham hears these assurances and in reply he reminds the God of the universe that he hasn't quite fulfilled all his promises yet. He almost sounds a bit ungrateful, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless. Remember, you promised to make me a great nation of people. But to date, you have given me no offspring. I'm ninety years old and my heir is a servant of my household."

God was not insulted by Abraham's complaint. God liked the engagement. He likes it when we engage him too. Because Abraham asked his questions in the context of relationship. I have given my life to you. You made promises to give life to me. What's the deal? How very different that is from the person trying to live life on his own asking a God he doesn't know why things aren't better. Abraham

questions God as one who belongs to him. He's thrown his whole future into God's care, and now he wants to know more about that future.

So the LORD brings him out from his tent under the stars. Remember those old Capital One commercials where they ask, "What's in your wallet?" The advertisers want to know if you have some ordinary credit card with high fees and no rewards, or do you have the card that gives you maximum miles. In this scene, God seems to be asking Abraham, "What's in your tent?" Inside Abraham's tent there were no children. Not much of a future. But The LORD took him out to see what was in God's tent. Abraham, the sky is my tent. Look inside. Count these stars, if you can. Do you see all I own? As many stars as you see, that's how many children you will have. I can do it. I will do it."

Then comes one of the most important verses in all of the Bible. "Abraham believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." God didn't actually answer Abraham with the immediate gift of children. God showed him a glimpse of his power and glory, then restated the promise. Abraham decided to trust the character of the promise making God. He believed. This was not just blind faith or mental agreement. This was the entrusting of his life into the hands of God. And in the end, that's what our relationship with God is all about. Will I put myself, in heart and soul, body and mind, into the hands of God?

A couple weeks ago I was having a routine medical test, which shall go nameless. It did, however, require a few minutes of being under general anesthesia. Now I know that the science of anesthesia has advanced greatly and that these tests are highly monitored. Still, I couldn't help but think about the fact that I was about to go under, into the realm of unconsciousness. People can do anything they want to me in this condition. I am going where I may not come back. I'm always grateful at these times for the blessed Holy Spirit who dwells inside me. For I had a deeply peaceful feeling that whatever happened, I am not my own. I belong to Jesus. I have come from God and will return to God.

The anesthesia nurse prepared to put me under. "Mr. Dawson, how are you doing?" My reply was easy, "I'm going into the hands of God." Now I generally keep a low public profile about my faith. But I needed to say that because it's the truth of my being, and I wanted it said, especially if that was the last thing I got to say. I guess I hoped for a more encouraging response. I'm going into the hands of God. She replied, "Well something is about to go into *your* hand!" Really? I thought. That's all you've got to say? "Mr. Dawson, what do you do for a living?" I'm a pastor. "I thought maybe so." No, no, no, I thought. This is what anybody

who trusts in God would say. I am in the hands of God. I am going into the hands of God. That's the truth at the heart of any Christian. In my last lucid moments, I at least retained enough sense not to scold the person putting propanol into my veins! I woke up to Rhonda's beloved face telling me it was all over and all was well.

Abraham believed God, and he counted it to him as righteousness. Before the promise was fulfilled, Abraham trusted his LORD. Abraham staked his life and future on being in the hands of God.

Then we read of one of the most bizarre yet glorious days ever recorded. We see that God never asks us to do anything he won't do himself. In fact, God is always willing to go further in loving us than whatever he asks of us. In the scene that followed, God staked his very life on keeping his promise to Abraham. He pledged his eternal life to this fallible, fragile man.

The LORD directed Abraham to gather animals and prepare a sacrifice. We know now that Abraham was being asked to set up a covenant ceremony. In the ancient Middle East, kings and their subjects made covenants, solemn agreements, together, and sealed them with a ritual involving blood and sacrifice. The offered animals were cut in half. The parties of the agreement said to each other, "May I be cut in half like these animals if I do not keep my part of this covenant." That's a serious promise. Sealed in blood. Each of the two parties would then walk between the severed animals, along what was called the blood path. Each staked his whole life on being faithful to the promises made.

So Abraham had some idea of what was going on while he prepared the animals. God was making promises and Abraham would be obligated to pledge himself to do whatever God required in return. He had already left everything to come to this land. He had waited until his old age for the promised children. What more could be asked? Abraham would fully have expected to walk the blood path as a sign of his faith. But the word never came. The day passed and nothing had occurred.

The strange twist came when night fell. Abraham entered a deep sleep. And in his trance, the LORD spoke to him about the promise. The delay would be far worse than Abraham had feared. For even though Abraham would one day have a son and then many offspring, they would not inherit the land for centuries. God told Abraham of the four centuries of slavery Abraham's offspring would have to endure in Egypt. The delay Abraham had already experienced was nothing. God's

plan for centuries in the unfolding. Abraham would not live to see all the promise enacted, but he must trust God to keep his word.

Then Abraham, coming out of his sleep, saw a strange sight. In the darkness, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the split carcasses of the animals. The smoke and fire represented the LORD God. The sovereign King of the universe walked the blood path for Abraham. God staked his very life on keeping his promise to Abraham. And he obligated himself for Abraham's part of the deal too. God pledged to do in and for Abraham all that was required. This was a crazy deal! What banker would also sign for the one taking out the mortgage? What homebuilder would pledge to do the contractor's work as well? What king would swear to pay the peasant's taxes himself? God is keeping faith for both of them.

Once again, God's people would never really understand these events until the coming of Jesus Christ. Suddenly, it would all make sense. The eternal Son of God stepped into our world as a man. God came down from his side, to take up doing the work required of us on our side. He came to do as a man what we were required to do but could not. Jesus came to keep faith for us. He came to fulfill God's righteous commands. He came to live out, from man's side, perfect love for his Father. He came to live out, from inside our skin, perfect love for neighbor. Jesus is God fulfilling his promise, staking his whole life on keeping not only God's part of the covenant, but our part as well.

The sad truth is that when he was among us, by and large, we hated him. We hated his goodness. We were jealous of his intimacy with God. We resented the claim he made on our wealth, our sexuality, our revenge and anger, our time and our goals. His light was intolerably bright to our darkness. We rejected him. Even his closest friends new the impulse to deny and to turn away. But the amazing news of the gospel is that Jesus accounted for all that. Even our rejection was part of the plan. Last we noted how Jesus is a priest to us. A priest brings the things of God to man, and he brings the things of man to God. We looked at it all positively. But there is a negative aspect of priesthood as well. Jesus our priest took the wrath of God due our sin. And took the rejection of God that spews from our hearts. He took both God's wrath and our sin with him to the cross. He let himself be torn apart as if he were a covenant breaker. He went to the cross in order to take our faithlessness and return it as his everlasting commitment to forgiveness and grace.

He gave everything to keep covenant *with* us. He gave everything to keep covenant *for* us. He had faith, he enacted love, and he obeyed for us when we could not. All so we could enter fellowship with him.

When we get this, we realize just how silly it is to say that whatever way you want to conceive of God is ok. As if any path would lead to the God who joined himself to us eternally in skin and bone in the one man Jesus Christ. When we get this, we understand why we can never get to God by asking him to assist us in living the life we want to live for ourselves. As if he were a genie. He will not answer when we call out to God asking him to serve us. If you won't see how he already staked his whole life on you, then you will never know him. If you won't see how he has already served you utterly on the cross, then you will never find his presence in your life.

God gives his life to us freely and utterly. No spiritual idea anywhere ever has such a God as this. He walks the blood path. He lets himself be split and torn. He fulfills the requirements for us. It is all his work. It is freely given. But it's not free. He demands our faith. Faith that releases control of our lives into the hands of God. Faith that is utter trust. Faith that says Your will, not mine, be done.

Passing through the eye of the needle, we are stripped of all pride and pretense, all claims to goodness, all attempts to dictate to God how it's going to be. ***Insist on yourself, and you will be left with yourself.*** A miserable covenant breaker who has no clue where true life can be found. Put yourself into the hands of God as he has made himself known in Jesus Christ and you will find everything you've ever wanted. God has staked his very eternal life on you. He asks you to trust him. Once for all for salvation, of course. But also every day. The challenge comes every moment. The time for commitment is every present second. Now. Not my way, but your way Jesus. How are you doing there, Mr. Dawson? I am going into the hands of God. How about you?