

“Christ and the Covenant with Abraham Part 2” Genesis 15 Shane Hatfield 10/24/21

We believe that the Bible is the word of God and it brings truth and life, so every week we read it, we meditate on it, we study it, and right now we’re studying Christ and the Covenants from the Old Testament. So far, we’ve looked at the covenant with Adam, the covenant of works God made with him that Adam failed to keep and plunged this world into sin and misery. Then, we studied the covenant of Noah. It’s a covenant of preservation. God promised to preserve all of creation so that we would have a good and stable home so that He could redeem a people for Himself. Last week we began studying the covenant with Abraham. It’s a covenant of promise. We saw that God promised to give Abraham a great home and make him a great nation. He promised to give him a great big family of people that know God and love Him and worship Him. Well, after God made those promises in chapters 13 and 14, we see Abraham struggle to live in this new land that God called him to, and we know that God had not given him a child yet, so Abraham was fearful and afraid. That’s the context that we come to here in Genesis 15. What we see here is that God meets Abram in his fear and his doubt, and He reassures him that God’s word will prevail. So, let’s read Genesis 15 and we’re going to read the whole chapter. Start in verse 1. Hear the word of the Lord:

“<sup>1</sup>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.” <sup>2</sup>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?” <sup>3</sup>And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” <sup>4</sup>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.” <sup>5</sup>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.” <sup>6</sup>And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

<sup>7</sup>And he said to him, “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?” <sup>9</sup>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.” <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

<sup>12</sup>As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. <sup>15</sup>As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. <sup>16</sup>And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

<sup>17</sup>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, <sup>19</sup> the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, <sup>20</sup> the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, <sup>21</sup> the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”

All men are like grass and their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers. The flowers fade. Our footballs teams lose, and October fest ends. But not the word of the Lord, it stands forever. Let’s listen to it.

My good friend, Ricky Jones, is the pastor of RiverOaks Presbyterian Church here in South Tulsa. Before he was the pastor there, he was an RUF campus minister at Mississippi State University and while he was there, he decided that he wanted to go into church planting. So, he started applying to different church planting jobs all over the country. He applied for one here in Tulsa and so, they brought him out for a visit, and the recruiter brought him out here and showed him the great, wonderful land flowing with milk and honey that is Tulsa, Oklahoma, that we all know and love, and he knew Ricky liked to play golf, so he took Ricky to Cedar Ridge Country Club and there on the golf course he made a promise to him. He said, ‘If you come to Tulsa to plant this church, then you will get not only to live in this great city, and not only be a part of this great church plant, but you will get a free membership to Cedar Ridge Country Club.’ So, Ricky and his wife prayed about it and they thought about it and they said, ‘Yes! God is calling us to Tulsa to plant this church.’ So, they move their family here to plant that church, and fifteen years later, that church is growing and thriving and doing well, and Ricky never got that golf club membership. In fact, I’m not sure he’s ever played a single round at Cedar Ridge Country Club since then. That promise went unfulfilled. Amy, did you guys promise me a membership? It was Southern Hills, wasn’t it? No? It wasn’t Southern Hills?

We all live with unfulfilled promises, don’t we? The world makes promises to us. Our family makes promises to us. God makes promises to us. But deep in our hearts, we doubt that those promises are going to be fulfilled. Our parents promised us great things. They promised us love and joy and happiness. They promised us that they would come in and check on us at night before we go to bed. But sometimes, they forget, and they don’t keep those promises, do they? Our job offers us happiness, fulfillment, and joy, but sometimes it doesn’t meet those expectations. Our spouse offers us faithful love and service all the days of our life, but there are days when they fall short and they can’t keep those promises. God offers us all these amazing promises in His word, but we struggle to see how they are going to be fulfilled. We struggle with fear and doubt. If that’s you this morning, there’s good news in this passage. God comes to Abram in a moment of fear and doubt, and He reassures him that God will fulfill His promises. He gives Abraham a word of promise, a sign of promise, and a covenant of promise. What I want you to see this morning is that we live our lives each and every day by faith, not in ourselves, and not in this world, but in the God who makes great promises, and keeps those promises, in a God who is faithful even in a world that is unfaithful. So, let’s look at those three things: the word of promise, the sign of promise, and the covenant of promise.

The first thing we see is God gives Abraham a word of promise. So, in Genesis 14 Abram is shown this land, he’s a part of this land and all around him are kings and kingdoms that are fighting, there’s conquering, there is all this stuff, and the king of Sodom comes to Abram says, ‘If you just side with me, I’m going to give you great wealth, and I’m going to give you this land, and I’m going to protect you.’ And Abram says, ‘No. I don’t want it. I’m not going to take your land. I’m not going to take your money. I’m not going to take your protection.’ He trusted God. He trusted that God was going to provide, but he was also afraid that God wasn’t going to fulfill those promises. So, what does God do? God meets him in that fear. We see this in verse 1.

It says, “the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” God met Abram in his fear, and he reassured him by giving him a word. Notice it says that there is a vision, but notice the emphasis is not on the vision, the emphasis is on God’s word. When we struggle, and when we doubt, we need God’s word the same way that Abram needed it.

At night I always make promises to my kids that I will come and check on them before they go to sleep, and they always say, ‘Okay dad, you promise me. But how do I know you’re going to keep your word?’ And I try to reassure them that I’m going to keep my word. But sometimes I forget. When we do bedtime, we also pray. And they say, ‘Daddy, I want to pray to God, but He doesn’t answer my prayers. How do I know when God is speaking to me? How do I know when I hear His voice?’ And I say, ‘We go to His word, and we listen to His word, and His word is the way that He speaks to us.’

The Bible tells us that there are two different ways that God speaks to us. One is what we call general revelation. Psalm 19 and Romans 1 tell us that the heavens declare the glory of God. Through all of creation we can see God’s goodness and His power. We can know that He exists. We can know His attributes. It’s what we call general revelation. But the Bible also tells us that God speaks to us by special revelation, and that special revelation is in the Bible. It’s in the word that we have recorded in scripture. It’s here that God gives us direction for life, and He gives us everything we need to know for salvation. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, “All scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness that the man of God might be complete and equipped for every good work.” The Holy Spirit works by and with the word of God to teach us everything we need to know for life and godliness.

So, we’re studying the Old Testament, so some of you may be like, ‘Okay, maybe the New Testament. But the Old Testament? Is the Old Testament reliable? Can I really trust it?’ And if you’re reading through the Old Testament right now you know there’s a lot of crazy stuff that happens in the Old Testament that’s hard to believe! Well, Jesus believed that the Old Testament was reliable. Jesus trusted the Old Testament. He quoted it often! He believed in it. If it’s good enough for Him, it’s probably good enough for us, right? Peter tells us that the Old Testament is sufficient, that it’s inspired by God. Peter says that men wrote as God guided them and men spoke as God guided them by the Holy Spirit. So even though these stories are filled with different writers of different backgrounds, different interests, even different personalities, what we believe is that by the Holy Spirit, God was guiding these men to write what needed to be wrote so that we could hear the word of the Lord whenever we need it. In times of doubt, in times of fear, in times when we need reassurance, what we need is God’s word.

My friend told me a story once about how his brother was offered the chance to buy a business. It was a good business opportunity, but it was going to be kind of risky. He genuinely wanted to know, should I buy this, should I not buy this? He wasn’t sure. So, his brother came to him and said, ‘This is what I’m going to do. I’m going to go get in my prayer closet and I’m going to stay in my prayer closet until I hear the word of the Lord tell me whether I should buy that business or not.’ So, my friend, he’s a pastor but he’s kind of cynical, he’s like, ‘Okay! Sure. That’s not how God’s going to speak to you but go ahead if that’s what you want to do.’ So, his brother goes into his prayer closet. He stays in there for a long time. He comes out. He goes to my friend and he says, ‘Okay. I know what I’m going to do.’ And my friend says, ‘Well, did you hear from the Lord?’ And his brother said, ‘Yeah,’ and he said, ‘Well, what did He say?’ And he said, ‘The Lord said, if you buy the business, I’m going to be with you, and if you don’t buy the

business, I'm going to be with you. I'm going to be with you no matter what.' And my friend said, 'Oh! That sounds exactly like what God would say, because that's exactly what He says in His word.' Whenever you're fearful, whenever you doubt, whenever you're struggling to believe the promises of God, go to His word. Read it. Meditate on it. Learn it. Pray that the Holy Spirit would illuminate in your heart and in your mind what you need and then believe Him and trust Him.

He gives us a word of promise. The second thing He gives us is a sign of promise. If you look at verse 4 it says this: "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." 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." Have you ever gone outside in the country or in the mountain someplace where there aren't a lot of lights around and just seen all the stars at night? I grew up in the country in Coweta, Oklahoma and we lived about ten miles outside of Coweta which is not a city. So, we lived like 30-40 minutes from Tulsa, so we lived pretty far out in the country. But I loved going out on those clear summer nights and sitting on my back deck and just looking up at the stars and seeing the sky just filled with stars. You can't count them! You can't number them. I don't even think science can count all the stars. I think scientists, they just say there's 30 or 40 billion, right? They're just making an estimate. They can't even count all the stars! Now imagine being Abram going out in the middle east with no lights around, no cities around, imagine all the stars that he saw, and God said, 'Your offspring are going to be like the numbers of the stars.' Abraham's like, 'That's a great promise, God, but I don't have anybody! I don't have a son. I don't have anybody to be the heir of my family! At this point, I'm old, I don't have a child, I don't understand how you're going to make this promise come true.' And what God is doing with the stars is He is giving him a sign of His promise. He's giving him a visible assurance that God's promise is true. He's giving him a physical assurance of an invisible word.

What God is doing here is He is laying the foundation for what we call the signs of the covenant. Every covenant has signs. The covenant with Adam in the garden had a sign; it was the tree of life. The covenant with Noah had a sign; it was the rainbow in the clouds. When we get to Genesis 17 Abraham has a sign as well; it's called circumcision. We're going to study that next week. There's a little teaser. Come back next week. If you want to know all about the signs, that's what we're going to talk about. What God is doing in the signs is giving us a visible reminder, a visible assurance of an invisible promise. God is already preparing Abraham and us to receive that sign. What I want to focus in on this morning is not the sign, but just the way that God approaches doubt. Think about how kind and gracious that was of God to give Abram a sign. God didn't squash him. He didn't destroy him. He didn't shake His finger at him and go, 'You just believe because I told you so!' He gave him a sign.

Now, when you're thinking about belief and unbelief, there are two types. There is a sinful unbelief that rejects the promises of God. What did it say about the serpent in the garden, he said, 'Did God really say that you couldn't eat of any tree in the garden?' He was rejecting God's promise. That's a sinful version of unbelief. That kind of unbelief is the kind that deconstructs the belief, that makes it cool to doubt, that makes it okay to reject God's word or to reject God's law and try to do life on your own. And I think the deconstruction that we're seeing a lot of in our culture, and that people are talking about, I think some of that is a sinful deconstruction. They're taking apart God's character. They're taking apart God's word. They're breaking down the foundation of our faith, not in a way to build it up on God's word but a way to build it up on their own word, and their own thoughts, and culture.

But there's also a healthy form of doubt that comes not from unbelief, but from belief. The reason Abraham was struggling right now was because he believed God's promises. He believed that God was going to make him a great nation. He believed that God was going to give him a good home, but he didn't have those things. His doubt came not from unbelief but from belief. You see this actually throughout the Bible, you see several people like this. Mary, when the angel came to her and said she was going to have a child, and that child was going to be the Savior, she said, 'How is this going to happen? I'm a virgin!' Thomas, when he said, 'I can't believe unless I see Jesus' hands and His sides.' It wasn't unbelief that was driving their doubt, it was belief! It was belief that the Lord existed, that God could do something that was impossible. Job was another great example of this. The book of Job is filled with Job's suffering. There are forty chapters of God allowing this man to suffer greatly, and the reason why it was so hard for Job was because he believed that God was almighty and all-powerful, and so he struggled with the fact that he's struggling on the one hand, but he's got a good, loving, all-powerful God on the other hand. We can struggle the same way. You can have doubts. You can struggle with assurance of your salvation and it totally come from a place of wanting to believe and trust in God. In all honesty, Christians, myself included, are a mix of sinful unbelief and true belief and faith in God. We're a mix of those things. Sometimes side by side, sometimes in the same day or at the same time.

What do we do in those moments? We cried out like we cried earlier, 'I believe. Help my unbelief.' There's a story in Mark 9 where they bring a demon possessed boy to Jesus for Him to heal and Jesus says this: 'How long has this been happening to him?' And the father says, 'From childhood and it has often cast him into the fire and the water to destroy him, but if you can do anything have compassion on us and help us!' And Jesus said to him, 'If? If I can? All things are possible to the one who believes.' And immediately the father of the child cried out and said, 'I believe! Help my unbelief!' And Jesus healed the boy after that. That was the prayer of faith. If you are a Christian struggling with doubt, needing reassurance, come to the Lord and say, 'I believe. Help my unbelief. Help me understand what you're doing with my children right now. Help me understand what you're doing with my work. Help me understand what you're doing with my spouse. Help me understand what you're doing with my singleness. I believe. Help my unbelief!' That's a prayer that comes from faith. That's a prayer that God answers. He meets us in that unbelief, and He reassures us that He loves us, and He cares for us.

He gives us a word of promise, He gives us a sign of promise, and lastly, He gives us a covenant of promise. Verse 7 says, "And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess." God reassured him that he was going to possess the promised land, just like He told him in Genesis 12 that we looked at last week. I love Abraham's response. Just like my kids do to me. "But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" How do I know that my spouse is going to love me forever until we die? How do I know that my job is going to provide for my family? How do I know that my health is going to hold up long enough for me to see my grandkids? How do I know? How does God respond? God responds by performing this covenant making ceremony with Abram. So he tells him, 'I want you to take a heifer, a goat, a pigeon, a turtledove, and cut them in half and lay them opposite of each other.' So imagine him taking these animals, cutting them in half, and putting one side of the animals over here in a line, and the other side of the animals over here in a line, okay? So he's basically making a row or an altar with these animals.

So, this may sound really bizarre to us because we don't do stuff like this nowadays, but we know from archaeology that this was actually very common in this culture. In the ancient

near east, this was a way of making a covenant with someone, or literally, cutting a covenant is what the Bible says. A modern-day example of this would be like in marriage, we have a wedding or a wedding ceremony and, in that ceremony, symbolically you typically have two sides with the altar down the middle and the bride comes down the altar and they walk down it symbolizes that these two sides of the family are coming together to become one! They come up to the front to the priest, they make these vows to each other, they make promises, they make oaths, and the priest administers those. And then afterward, what do they do? They go back and they sign a marriage certificate, and the priest signs the marriage certificate, and all that ceremony is a covenant, it's forming a bond between these two people. It's bringing these two people together and it's creating one marriage. It's a covenant ceremony.

Well, we have the same thing going on here. It's a covenant ceremony between God and Abram. When God has him cut those animals and lay them apart, what they're doing is they're saying, 'If I break this covenant, if I don't keep these promises, then may I be like these animals. May I be cut in half like these animals.' They're promising that the curses are going to be carried out on them as it was these animals. So, we actually have an example of this in the Bible in Jeremiah 34. God told Jeremiah, He said, 'I want you to go to my people and tell them, you told all these Hebrews that you were going to let them go,' so they were keeping slaves and the people made a covenant that they were going to let the slaves go. They let them go, but then they brought them back. God came to them and said, 'Look, you let the slaves go but then you brought them back. You broke my covenant.' It actually says, "You have not obeyed my command to free your brother's neighbors, so I will make you like the calves that your leaders walked between." So, when they made the covenant, they cut these calves in half and the leaders walked between them and because they didn't keep that covenant, they broke the covenant, God let Babylon come in and discipline them. So, Abraham knew what was going on, they knew what was going on, they knew exactly what was happening. Abraham knew what was happening between he and God.

So, this is what he thought. He thought, either I'm going to walk between the pieces or both God and I are going to walk between the pieces together, so he goes to sleep. While he's asleep this dreadful, great darkness falls on him because this is a big deal. This is a scary thing. He realizes that he is entering into a special relationship with the Lord of space, time, and dimension. He's afraid. In that fear, God speaks to him and God prophesies, and He says, 'Look, this is what's going to happen. Your people are going to go to a land for 400 years. They're going to be slaves, but I'm going to deliver them out of it and they're going to have this land. You are going to die at a good, old age.' So, he prophesies. But then, something shocking and amazing and totally unexpected happens. God doesn't ask Abram to walk between the pieces. Instead, a smoking pot and a fire walk between the pieces. The Lord walked between the pieces. Just the Lord. And when the Lord walked between the pieces, what He was saying to Abram, and what He was saying to us is 'If I don't keep my promises, let me be cut in half like these animals.'

But not only that, 'Abram, if you don't keep your promises, I am going to be cut like these animals. I am walking through and making this covenant for me and for you.' What God did in that moment was He made a promise that He was going to suffer and die for the unfaithfulness of His people. He was putting salvation 100% on Himself, and at that moment when He walked through those pieces, it wasn't just about the Father. We believe in a triune God. He was God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Jesus was present at that moment and Jesus knew as He's walking through those pieces that one day, someday, He would

be the one who was cut in half for the sins of God's people, and on the cross, He was cut off from the world, and He was cut off from the Father for us, for our unbelief, for our rebellion, for our sin. What this is saying is that salvation is totally, 100%, completely, utterly dependent on the Lord. There is no way you and I can save ourselves. There is nothing that we contribute to our salvation except the sin that makes it necessary. Yet, God Himself saves us, He rescues us, He brings us to Himself, so that we can experience Him and all of His goodness. The covenant of grace is a bond in blood that God gives to sinners like us.

How do we receive it? We receive it the way that Abraham did. We receive it by faith. It says in verse 6, "And he believed the Lord and it was counted to him as righteousness." Abraham believed the promises of God, and it was his faith in God's promises that wiped his spiritual record clean, that filled his spiritual bank account, that brought him into a right relationship with God and allowed him to experience all of the goodness and glory of God in a relationship with Him, both now and into eternity. This is the first time in the Bible that we see faith and justification brought together, but Paul tells us in the New Testament that all who have the faith of Abraham, all who believe God are also made righteous. So, when we come to God with our sin and our suffering and we confess that we need Him to rescue us, we need Him to save us, that we need Him to save us from our unbelieving, cold, legalistic, Pharisaical hearts. He truly does save us. Not based on anything that we've done but based on His goodness and grace. He blesses us with His presence and His power and His provision. By faith in God, He is our reward and our protector. Now I want to close with this, notice that it doesn't say that Abram believed in God. Isn't that interesting? There's a difference between believing that God exists and believing God. James tells us that even the demons believe that God exists, and they shudder. If you just believe that God exists, that is not true saving faith. That is a shuddering faith. That is a faith that will not save you. True, saving faith is a faith that believes in the promises of God. That throws your whole weight, your whole trust, your whole life on Him, that gives Him everything.

True saving faith looks like this: when we lived in Stillwater, I used to take my kids rock climbing at the Colvin center because they have this really cool rock wall indoors. They would go rock climbing and they would climb up and I would belay them at the bottom and interestingly enough, getting up to the top was not the problem. You know, they're light and physically that was easy, they just mentally had to get over the hurdle of being up there really high, so it just took a little tough love from dad. "Come on, get up there!" But when they go to the top, that's when it got really hard because to come down from the wall this is what you have to do. You have to take your hands off the wall, leave your feet there kind of against the wall, take your hands off the wall and hold onto the rope and put all your weight into the harness. As you put all your weight into the harness, you had to trust that I was going to be there, that I was going to keep my promise to lower you down on the belay. They had to trust me. They had to trust my promise to save them.

Saving faith in Jesus looks like that. It looks like taking your hands off the wall, off of your life. It looks like giving up control and grabbing the rope, Jesus, and resting in Him and letting your heavenly Father rescue you from whatever sin and suffering that you have. That's what Abraham had to do. He had to let go and it cost him his family, it cost him his land, it may have cost him Isaac and Sarah, we don't really know, later on it looks like Isaac and Sarah part and go the other way and Abraham is by himself. But God promised to be his great reward, he promised to be his shield and his protector. He was to Abraham until the day he died.

When I became a Christian, I had to let go of my identity. I had to let go of wanting to be a baseball player and a partier and a professional liar and all these great things. I had to let go of all those identities and give my identity to Jesus. As a forty-year-old father, yesterday I had to give up control. I had to give up the desire to control my wife and my kids and my life and everything in my day under my own sovereign power. I had to live by faith. What do you need to let go of? Don't hold back. Let go. God gave you everything through His Son and He asks you to give up everything. In return, He promises to give you Himself. There was one time He told one disciple, He said, 'You've got to leave everything and follow me,' and this guy went away. And Peter looked at Him and said, 'What about us? We gave up everything!' And Jesus said, 'You'll have a hundredfold in this life and in the next.' To everyone who gives up their life for Jesus, God promises a hundredfold in this life and in the next, a truer, fuller, deeper life in Him. That's how it happens when you become a Christian, and that's how it happens when you grow as a Christian, and that's how it happens throughout the rest of your life. You always live by faith in the God who keeps His promises. So, let's go to God and let's pray that the Holy Spirit would do that today.