

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

God's Confirming Vision to Abraham

(Genesis 15:1-6)

-Martin Rizley-

3/30/2014

If there is one word that describes God's dealings with Abraham throughout the whole narrative of Abraham's life, it is the word grace. It was grace that made Abraham to differ from other men. In himself, he was no different than anyone else. When Abraham was living in Mesopotamia before God called him, he was given over to the practice of idolatry like all of his neighbors. If he underwent a dramatic change, that was owing entirely to God's gracious intervention in his life. The Lord called him out of idolatry and made wonderful promises to him solely by virtue of his grace; and Abraham was keenly aware of that fact. He knew that God had blessed him in remarkable ways, not because he deserved it, but because of the Lord's unsearchable purpose in election. And in the years following his call by God, he saw God's promises fulfilled in remarkable ways. God brought him to the land of Canaan; He prospered him there; He continued to watch over him and protect him during his brief sojourn in Egypt; He gave him victory in battle, and made him a blessing to others. Truly, God proved his faithfulness to Abraham over and over again throughout his first ten years in Canaan, giving Abraham every reason to believe that His promises would be fulfilled more gloriously in the future.

Nevertheless, despite all that he received from God, Abraham was still a man of flesh and blood like ourselves; and though he trusted in the Lord, there were times when he felt confused by circumstances that seemed to contradict his faith; at such times, he struggled to keep a firm hold on God's promises with unwavering grasp. At times, he felt the need for reassurance from the Lord. That is just what we see in the passage before us this morning.

The incident described here took place shortly after his victory in battle over the army of the four kings who invaded Canaan. We might expect to find Abraham rejoicing in his faith more exultantly than ever after that victory; but in fact, we see him downcast and troubled in his spirit. Why do I say that?

Because of what God said to him in verse 1: "Do not be afraid, Abram." It appears that Abraham was struggling in his heart at this moment of his life with a measure of fear or anxiety. That might strike us as odd, given the tremendous victory that he and his 318 fighting men had just won. Yet it is not unusual for

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

believers to enter into a period of trial immediately following what appears to be a great triumph. The Bible records other examples of men who, after having had a "mountain top experience" entered into what is called a "dark night of the soul."

Consider the prophet Elijah, for example, and what happened to him after his tremendous victory over the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. He triumphed magnificently over the forces of paganism on that mountain, and saw God's supernatural power displayed, as God answered His prayer and sent fire to consume his sacrifice. Yet almost immediately following that experience, we see him overcome with a spirit of fear, as Queen Jezebel threatened his life. In a panic, he ran off into the wilderness, sat down under a broom tree, and prayed that he might die. Why was he so downcast, after experiencing such a victory?

The reason was the contradiction between his expectations-- what he anticipated would happen after his victory on Carmel--, and what actually occurred. His high hopes for national revival were dashed by the stark reality that confronted him when he came off that mountain. No doubt, Elijah expected that his victory would result in the spiritual awakening of the children of Israel and the conversion of Israel's rulers. He probably thought that King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, confronted with clear evidence of God's superiority over Baal, would be deeply convicted of their idolatry and would turn in humble repentance to the God of Israel. But it soon became clear that was not going to happen. On the contrary, the events on Mt. Carmel only served to harden Jezebel in her unbelief and emboldened her to breathe threats against God's prophet. What a terrible blow for Elijah! His faith in the Word of God had engendered such joyful hopes for Israel's future; but those hopes were crushed by the cruel facts that stared him in the face. Since he could not make sense of what God was doing, he fell into despondency and despair.

Now Abraham's faith was not shattered like Elijah's, but he seems to have been experiencing a crisis of faith of his own when God appeared to him in a vision in Genesis 15. He had seen so many proofs of God's grace at work in his life. He had so many reasons to go on trusting in God's favor and rejoicing in His goodness. Yet for all that, Abraham found himself troubled, because something didn't seem to add up. There was something crucial missing in his life, and that missing something seemed to contradict all the high hopes he had for the future. What was that? It was the fact that God had not given him a son.

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

No doubt, Abraham had often reflected frequently on the promises that God made to him before he left Haran in Mesopotamia. Those promises must have thrilled his heart every time he thought of them. "God is going to make of me a great nation one day! He is going to give this land to my descendants forever! Not only that, He is going to make my descendants as the dust of the earth, and bless all the families of the earth through me!" No doubt, as Abraham reflected on these promises, they served as fuel to keep the fire of holy zeal burning in his heart.

But now, after nearly ten years in the Promised Land, Abraham was beginning to struggle to keep a firm hold on those promises, because the facts of his experience seemed to contradict them. Yes, God had been very good to him. He had blessed him in so many ways. But where was the seed God had promised? What tangible evidence was there that Sarah and he were going to have children? They had been in the land for almost a decade, and God had not yet blessed Sarah's womb, by making her fruitful. Moreover, each passing day made the fulfillment of the promise appear more impossible, more ludicrous from a natural standpoint, for neither Abraham nor Sarah were getting any younger. They were both well past child-bearing years already. Abraham had left Haran when he was seventy-five and now he was pushing 85. Sarah was seventy-five. How could Abraham go on holding fast to God's promise when all the visible evidence seemed to suggest that there would be no literal fulfillment of it in the way Abraham had anticipated. Abraham believed God and wanted to go on believing the promise, but quite frankly, he was troubled by the conflict between his early expectations and the hard facts of his present experience. He needed reassurance that his faith was not in vain.

You know, the wonderful thing about our Lord is that he knows us better than we know ourselves, and he knows what questions our heart is asking even before we do. He understands the doubts and fears that are weighing us down, even before we are mindful of them. So in his grace and mercy He comes to us, and He addresses Himself to us in such a way as to make us self-aware, so that we will no longer carry around a burden of anxiety, but will cast our care on the Lord. That is what God does here with Abraham. Knowing the questions that were in Abraham's heart, He took the initiative to answer those questions by speaking to Abraham in a vision. He did not wait for Abraham to come to Him with questions; he went to Abraham, which is the pattern we always see in God's relationship to fallen sinners. He seeks us, before we seek Him.

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

We read in verse 1, "After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.'" This is the first time we encounter in Scripture the expression "the word of the Lord came." This expression will be used many times later in Scripture with reference to Israel's prophets. Its occurrence here tells us that what Abraham received was a prophetic revelation-- an infallible message from God. That is the only thing that can set our hearts at rest when we are deeply troubled over the future. We need to hear God speaking to us a word from heaven, reassuring us that our trust in Him is not misplaced and that He will never leave us nor forsake us nor fail to fulfill in our lives all that He has promised to do for us. So God came to Abraham and spoke to him directly in order to give him a word of reassurance and to respond to whatever questions he had. So that is what we will consider in the time remaining: first, God's word of reassurance to Abraham; then Abraham's request of God; and finally, God's response to Abraham's request.

I. God's Word of Reassurance to Abraham-- The first thing God gave to Abraham in this vision was a word of reassurance, which is recorded in verse 1. He reassured Abraham of three things:

1) First, God reassured him that he had no reason to be afraid-- "Do not be afraid, Abraham." As I said before, it may well be that Abraham was not even aware of the fact that there was fear in his heart. But God knew, so he addressed Abraham in such a way as to make him aware of his own emotions, and to dispel his unexpressed fears through imparting to him a greater understanding of His divine plan.

What this tells us is that God is concerned about our emotional state. He is concerned about the anxieties that we carry around deep within us, and he wants us to become aware of those anxieties, so that we may cast them on Him. Sometimes Christians think that, in order to walk by faith, they must ignore their emotions and pretend they do not have negative feelings like fear or anxiety; but this approach to Christian living can lead us into an attitude of stoicism in which we try to keep a 'stiff upper lip' at all times, no matter what is happening. Warren Wiersbe points out, however, that it is a mistake to equate a stoical attitude with faith because, if God is concerned about our emotional state, that means He wants us to bring our emotions to Him, rather than denying they exist. "We are made in the image of God, and this includes our emotions," says Wiersbe. "While it is unwise to trust your emotions and bypass your mind, or let your emotions get out of control, it is also unwise to deny or suppress your

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

emotions and become a religious robot. In the psalms, David and the other writers told God honestly how they felt about Him, themselves, and their circumstances; and this is a good example for us to follow."

Consequently, as we approach God in prayer, we need to cultivate the habit of becoming aware of what is going on in our heart, and confessing to God any emotions that may be gnawing at us and robbing us of joy. We need to follow the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, who as a perfect man, never ignored feelings of sorrow or distress that were crushing Him, but expressed His feelings openly to the Father in prayer. Of Him we read in the book of Hebrews that "in the days of His flesh. . . He offered up prayers and supplications with vehement cries and tears to him who was able to save Him from death" (Hebrews 5:7).

In like manner, we need to learn to cry out to God from the depth of our soul and tell Him what is in our heart. We needn't hide any of our feelings from Him, because He loves us and cares for us so much. For that reason, we are invited to cast all our cares on Him, (1 Peter 5:7).

2) The second assurance God gave to Abraham was that He would be his Protector in the future, as He had been in the past-- "I am your shield" He said to Abraham. Abraham had recently experienced God's protection on the field of battle. His life had been exposed to grave danger when he went up against cruel armies to rescue his nephew from captivity; but God had been to him a mighty shield, protecting him from harm. God now reassured Abraham by saying, "I will continue to be your Protector in the future as I have been in the past. No matter what struggles lie ahead; no matter how vicious are your enemies or how vulnerable you feel in their presence, know this-- you have a sovereign Protector who is watching your back and who is committed to your defense."

This is a promise that God gives to every believer, for the fact is, as long as we are in this fallen world, we are exposed every day to mortal dangers of which we are only partially aware. We are exposed to the malice of unbelievers who are offended by our faith and who would love to see us stumble into sin or drift into apostasy. We are exposed to the subtle schemes of the devil, who is always looking for ways to tempt and deceive us. We are also exposed to the lusts of our own flesh, which wage war against the interests of our eternal soul. Our foes are legion, but God promises to be our Shield in every conflict we face; so we may trust in Him and sing joyfully of Him as our Sovereign Protector, even in the heat of battle

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

Perhaps Abraham was concerned that the four kings he defeated in battle might return at a later moment with reinforcements. He didn't want to have to spend his whole life waging constant warfare against invading armies. By saying, "I am your shield," God was letting him know he didn't have to worry about the future. God would look after him, no matter what.

3) The third assurance God gave to Abraham was of the certain provision of all his needs--

"I am your exceedingly great reward," He told him. With these words, God was reassuring Abraham that he had made the right decision when he rejected the spoils of war offered to him by Bera the king of Sodom. Abraham had turned down a vast fortune by turning down that offer. He did so because he didn't want any man to be able to say, "I have made Abram rich." He didn't want anyone to think that he had coveted Bera's wealth or that he shared Bera's materialistic value system. So he said 'no' to what he could have claimed for himself based on the customs of the day; and from a material standpoint, he was no richer for that decision. It is at least possible that Abraham had second thoughts about that decision and wondered if he had acted wisely. Whatever doubts he may have had, the Lord put them all to rest by saying, "I am your reward." He was saying, in essence, "I myself will be of greater worth to you than any treasure that men could give you. I will reward you in greater ways than you can ever imagine by giving you my favor, my fellowship, my transforming grace, my guiding hand, my protective care, not only for a day, or a year, or a lifetime, but for all eternity. In my presence, you will have fullness of joy-- pleasures forevermore as you behold my glory in eternity So do not be afraid, Abraham! You have chosen Me as your Protector, Provider, and Reward, and you will not be disappointed."

This was the assurance God gave to Abraham. It was a beautiful thing God said to him, but interestingly, the effect God's words was to make Abraham keenly aware of the nagging questions in his own heart. God's word should always expose to us what is going on in our heart; that is its intended effect, and for that we ought to pray. We ought to ask God to expose our hearts by His Word and show us where we need correction. Like David, we should pray, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." God's words made Abraham aware of the buried emotions within him, so he made his thoughts known to the Lord, as we should always do.

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

Abraham realized that the root of his anxiety was not the fear that he would find himself called to fight again against a foreign army. It was not the fear that he had made a poor choice in rejecting the offer of material wealth. Rather, his anxiety was rooted in something deeper-- the fear that somehow God's promises to him would fail. This was not a rational fear, for Abraham knew that God was trustworthy; but because he was unable to reconcile his circumstances with the Word of God or comprehend the mystery of God's ways, he struggled to keep holding on to God's promise with a firm grasp. Abraham was haunted by a troubling question that kept nagging him: "How can I become the father of a nation if I don't even have an heir?" He couldn't understand why God would allow him to live ten years in Canaan without giving him a son. What possible reason could God have for such a delay? How could he continue to hold firmly the Lord's promise by faith when every day he was getting older and his body weaker? Had he misunderstood God's promise? Perhaps God was not going to give him a son after all, but would provide him with a legal heir by some other means. Perhaps his own servant, Eliezer of Damascus, was destined to become his legal heir. Perhaps through him God would fulfill his promise. But is that really God's plan? Abraham was being torn apart by questions like these. He was growing despondent as the result of his confusion, and was beginning to fear that he had misunderstood God's promise-- that he had been mistaken all along in his expectations.

II. Abraham's Request of God-- So Abraham responded to God's Word of reassurance by making a request of God. He asked, in essence, for God to have mercy on him by delivering him from his mental confusion and giving him a greater measure of understanding that would strengthen his faith. In verses 2 and 3 we read, "But Abraham said, "Lord God, what will you give me, seeing that I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!"

Do you see what Abraham was saying to God? He was pointing to his felt need to have further revelation from God to understand the meaning of His promise and to lay hold of that promise with a firmer grasp. That's why he said, "Lord God, what will you give me?" God had given him a promise, but Abraham felt the need for something more, something to help his understanding. He was pointing to the fact that existing circumstances were making it exceedingly hard to believe that God's promise would be fulfilled in a literal manner, by him and Sarah having children. Surely the promise must mean something else. So he was

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

asking God for help to understand and believe. He was saying, "I have your promise God, but I am struggling to understand it. Could you please help me, Lord, by giving me something more than I have received from You already. Is Eliezer to be my heir; so far, he is the only potential heir you have given me? What else am I to think, Lord?"

Now, we mustn't think that Abraham's request sprang from a heart of unbelief. He was not arrogantly saying to God, "I cannot possibly believe your promise!" Rather, he was saying, "Lord, I'm having a hard time interpreting your promise. The most natural interpretation seems less plausible the older that Sarah and I get. So please help me out here, Lord."

Abraham's request reminds me of the question Mary asked when she was told that she would give birth to the Son of God. "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" Her question sprang, not from a heart of unbelief, but from a lack of understanding. She was expressing her confusion to God. She wanted to understand how God's promise would be fulfilled, not whether it would be fulfilled. That was Abraham's attitude, as well. He wanted to understand how God's promise would be fulfilled, so that he could lay hold of it with firmer grasp.

III. God's Response to Abraham-- Well, God responded to Abraham's request in a most merciful way, by giving him what he sought. God's response came in three steps: first, He revealed more of his plan to Abraham by correcting his misunderstanding; second, he appealed to His divine power, by directing Abraham's gaze to heaven; and third, He sealed His promises to Abraham, by making a covenant with him in accordance with the customs of that day.

A. He revealed more of His plan to Abraham-- In verse 4, we read how God revealed more of his plan to Abraham. He did this by letting him know, in the first place, that Eliezer of Damascus would not be his heir. It is understandable why Abraham would think that, given his age and Sarah's age. The idea that God would bless them with physical progeny in their old age after so many years of childlessness seemed from a human standpoint, rather laughable. But God wanted Abraham to understand that His ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts. God sometimes does things in a way that is totally surprising and that shatters all of our preconceived notions. God wanted Abraham to know beyond all doubt that his heir would be a son born of his own loins. Abraham's original understanding of the promise was correct in this respect and did not have to be modified because of his advancing age. What

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

Abraham needed to realize is that man's weakness cannot in any way diminish God's power-- and this child was to be born in a way that would highlight God's supernatural power and His amazing grace. This was the reason why Abraham and Sarah had remained childless until now; for God was deliberately waiting until both of them were "as good as dead" physically before giving them a son, so that He alone would receive all the power and glory for this child's amazing birth.

B. He appealed to His divine power-- God knew that Abraham was forgetting His infinite power. So to remind Him of His awesome greatness, He not only revealed His plan, but appealed to his power by directing Abraham's gaze toward the starry heavens. We read in verse 5, "Then He brought him outside and said, 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.' And He said to him, so shall your descendants be." There is something very, very precious about this moment in biblical history. I always feel a sense of awe when I picture Abraham standing there under the immense night sky and peering into the heavens and seeing all those countless twinkling points of light shining in the inky blackness. God was doing more than giving Abraham an object lesson. If that's all that He was doing, He could have simply said to him, "Abraham, your descendants will be as the numerous as stars of heaven, the dust of the earth, and the sand of the sea." But God wasn't just giving Abraham an analogy or a descriptive illustration; he was confronting Him with the visible evidence of His handiwork. He was saying to Abraham-- "Look up, Abraham, look up. Your perspective on my power is far too limited, far too bounded by the horizons of earth. Look up, and remember who I am. I am the Creator of the heavens and the earth. I made everything that is. Look at all those countless stars up there, and try to number them. You can't, because you are a finite man, and there are limits to your counting ability. But I am God, and I not only can count the stars and name each one of them; I created them all by my infinite power. Take a good long look at the evidence of my power, and ask yourself, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

Perhaps we ourselves need to do this when find ourselves weighed down by nagging questions about God and are tempted to doubt His promises to us in Scripture. There are times when we find ourselves in very trying circumstances; times in which we struggle to understand why God would allow certain things to happen. Why would he allow my child to die of cancer? Why would he allow my spouse to walk out on me? Why would he allow me to suffer from a debilitating disease, or to be incapacitated by a tragic accident? We are tempted at times to

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

doubt either God's goodness or His power, or possibly both. Perhaps at such moments, the best thing we could do is lift our gaze to heaven like Abraham and remind ourselves that the God we worship is exalted high above all our thoughts of Him. His ways are not our ways, His thoughts are not our thoughts. And His power is greater than we could ever imagine. There is the evidence of His existence, power and majesty, before our very eyes. We may not understand His ways, but we see the proof of His power, and we see the evidence of His love in the promises He makes to us.

As Abraham heard once again the promise of God concerning a multitude of descendants, and as he beheld the evidence of God's infinite power displayed before His very eyes, God worked a miracle of grace in His heart, dispelling his fears. We read in Genesis 15:3 (one of the most important verses in the Bible) "And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness."

This is the first occurrence of the word "believe" in the Bible, and it is the only place in the Old Testament where we read that God counted someone's faith for righteousness. What does that expression mean? When the Bible says that Abraham's faith was 'accounted' to him for righteousness, does that mean that God saw his faith as a righteous work deserving of salvation? If that were true, then faith would be a meritorious work-- the one work we perform to be saved. But that would be to pervert the meaning of this verse, for notice it does not say "Abraham's faith was his righteousness before God," but rather, "Abraham's faith was accounted to him for righteousness." The word accounted means "credited." If I credit money to your account that means it is not in your account to begin with. I put into your act by the act of crediting. So what this verse is saying, therefore, is that Abraham did not have any righteousness of his own, but God credited righteousness to him, and He did so in connection with his act of believing. In himself, Abraham had no righteousness before God, nor was his act of believing a righteous act deserving of salvation. Rather, God credited to Abraham the gift of righteousness through faith, or in connection with faith. What enables God to account faith as righteousness is the object on which it lays hold. What was the object of Abraham's faith? God's promise concerning his seed. Abraham believed that God by His almighty power would give him a seed or offspring, and through his seed, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. .

From a New Testament perspective, we know that this promise of a seed finds its ultimate fulfillment in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

supreme "seed of Abraham" in whom all the promise find climactic fulfillment. So whether or not Abraham fully realized it, by trusting in God's promise concerning the Seed, Abraham was really trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ, and through this faith that laid hold of Christ, God credited to him the gift of righteousness. So it was not the act of faith, but the object of his faith, that was the ground on which he was declared righteous.

Perhaps an illustration will help to show how the value of faith lies not in itself, but in the object on which it lays hold. Let's say I send you in the mail an envelope containing a thousand dollar bill. I send it to your post office box, and on the way home from the post office, you happen to drop the envelope on the street. You retrace your steps to find it, and when you reach the post office, you ask the clerk, "Did anyone happen to turn in an envelope with my name on it?" I am looking for it, because it is very valuable to me." Now, why is that envelope very valuable to you-- because of the paper from which it is made? No, not at all. The envelope is of no value to you at all in itself. It is valuable because of what is contained within it-- a thousand dollar bill. Now, in like manner, our faith is of no saving value in itself-- its value stems entirely from the object on which it lays hold, the Lord Jesus Christ. The righteousness of faith is therefore Christ's own righteousness, which we lay hold of and which is accounted to us by the act of believing.

When the Bible says that Abraham 'believed' God, the word believed in Hebrew is a form of the word with which we end our prayers, the word "amen." So what the text is saying is that Abraham, in response to God's promise concerning the seed, said "amen" in his heart to the promise. He trusted in God, in other words; he said in his heart, "Yes, Lord, amen! I believe with all my heart that your promise is true," and through that simple act of trusting God, believing His word, he received the free gift of righteousness. He did not work to become righteous; he rested in God's promise to do a work on his behalf. In like manner, we must respond to God's declaration regarding the finished work of Christ by resting in that finished work and entrusting ourselves to the risen Savior to save us from our sins through the power of the cross.

When we are going through a dark night of the soul and wondering how God will fulfill to us all the precious promises He has made, we need to do as Abraham, and look beyond ourselves, beyond the narrow confines of earth, to the starry heavens, and even beyond, to the Glorious Seed in whom all God's promises to us are "yes" and "amen." Christ is the only One who can dispel our fears and fill our hearts with faith. In Him, all of God's promises to us have been

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

signed, sealed, and delivered, so that all who believe may say in response to those promises, both now and throughout all eternity, "Amen, Lord! Amen!" May God give us such a faith that holds fast to the Lord and keeps on believing His promises at all times, through every trial and difficulty.

Amen.