

Genesis 15

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Faith: Up close and personal

"And Abram believed in the Lord"

[For those online, there is the text of Scripture and some endnotes today which will help in your understanding of covenant]

Introduction

Shabbat shalom. Today we will see the story of God and Abram in a very personal way. Some sections of the Bible are grand with large battles between 9 nations as we saw last week or all the kingdoms of the world gathered like we saw in the Tower of Babel. Some grand sections are less known such as the battle between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, where others like the Flood of Noah are recognized by cultures far and wide. But today's story, although it has huge implications for each person in the planet then and now, is a very personal moment or two between God and his friend Abram.

I'm glad we can see this in the book of Genesis. We are learning each week about how God deals with humanity, from the Creation to the Fall to each person called to perform and to know Him. This week, the zoom lens of our biblical camera focuses our attention on a moment, and on God's promises, and on one man's faith. Maybe we can learn from this as well. Maybe God and you have some things to sort out. Maybe you and God need some time or conversation like we will see in this week's pericope.

Today I see the Promise Renewed as a reminder of God's plans and God's provisions. The outline today is "God's word, God's wonders, and God's initiative"

Read Gen 15.

God's Word

The Jewish religion today is fixated on Moses. He is the prophet of God who most notably heard God speak and who gave information to the Jewish people. He wrote the first 5 books of the Bible after all, including this Genesis we are studying each week here. In Numbers 12.6-8 we read that God spoke to Moses mouth to mouth. Awesome. A veritable intimacy that most would say has not ever been before. But anyone who reads the patriarchs, or as we say in the Amidah, our Fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, knows that God addressed these men as well. (Gen. 12.1, 4, 13.14, 15.1, 21.12, 22.1) Either we read "The word of the Lord came to..." or "The Lord said to him..." So what I'm saying is that Abraham and his sons were of equal note to Moses in receiving God's word. Antedating as we began discussing last week, helps us find meaning outside and before the Law, which is a key understanding to the continuing realities. Let me explain. If God only began to speak with mankind in Moses' time, then Moses would be the most significant and what he said about God (which has become nicknamed, The Law) would be the most significant. And if in the New Testament times, we would ever dismiss the Covenant or the constitution of Moses, then we would be like ships without a rudder. But if there is an antedating of God's communication with people, then when Moses is removed, there is still plenty of comfort to be found in the God who spoke earlier. See?

God also spoke in this time through dreams and appearances. We'll speak about those epiphanies or theophanies later, but for now, dreams like the one in today's story are very significant.

So let's see what happened.

Verse one says that God spoke to Abram and told him something in covenantal terminology. He told him " Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great"

These three words brought an immediate response by Abram about his own destiny, that is, his own progeny. God said he would protect Abram (that's good after chapter 14's world war battle scenes), and that Abram need not be afraid. That's very good news indeed. We will see this fear/ I am language used throughout the Scripture in both Older and Newer Testament. The one who says "I Am" is the one who can issue the directive against fear. For He is then saying that He will fight such battles. Very good news indeed.

But the third word brought discomfort to Abram both in this chapter and others in the book. Abram replied about a problem in this reality of generational continuity. Abram is an old fellow by now, well into his 7th or 8th decade. The only real close mate he has, who might be close enough to satisfy the kinship ideals of early Near Eastern civilization is not Lot who has blown in several times in the last few chapters, but Eliezer Abram's servant. Would that count, Abram wants to know?

God's word comes again saying, 'nope.' In fact, God says, go with me to the observatory and let's have an astronomy lesson. Can you count the stars, which might number 10,000

visible to the naked eye? No? Well then neither will you be able to number your seed. From your own body, your seed... this is going to be bigger than anything you can imagine, Abram.

Know what Abram did? He believed God. Yup, that's right. He trusted that God knew what was going on. He'd already seen the reality of that in Babel and again in Haran and in Egypt, and in Canaan in so many ways. So... why not here?

The idea of 'seed' was not new. Remember God used that term in the protoevangelion in chapter 3 to the serpent. Eve was promised a seed and the people of Seth had been waiting for him to come along ever since. Never is the word used in the plural, like we see with sons or most other biblical nouns.

Walter Kaiser says, "The drama of the possible obstacles and frustrations that would have permanently blocked the divine intention make up a large part of the historical record in this era." He goes on to cite the various problems that Abram experienced along with his family, such as barrenness (all three matriarchs had this one) and old age (17.17, 18.11-13). The monarchs in Egypt and Canaan were another threat in the stealing of the matriarchs (12.10-20, 20.1-18, 26.1-11). Ravaging effects of famine (12.10), filial hostility (32.7-8) and the slaughter of infants conducted by Pharaoh were other obstacles Kaiser cites.

We could add to this list the plot in this chapter of the servant to replace the seed, or of earlier indications of Lot being a candidate, or even Abram's attempt to keep Isaac who will be the seed born, alive and away from harm's way in his own strength. (Gen. 22).

All the while God's word is true and faithful. Abram will have a seed and that seed will be the serpent bruiser who will save the Jewish people and die for us, be born of a virgin and who will have pain in his own being. (Chapter 3.15) On God's word we can count, amen?

God's wonders

Righteousness

Not only is God's word to Abram to be noticed and honored, but so are God's wonders. In modern times we define a host of relations by contracts. These are usually for goods or services and for hard cash. The contract, formal or informal, helps to specify failure in these relationships. The Lord did not establish a contract with Israel or with the church. He created a covenant. There is a difference. Contracts are broken when one of the parties fails to keep his promise. If, let us say, a patient fails to keep an appointment with a doctor, the doctor is not obligated to call the house and inquire, "Where were you? Why didn't you show up for your appointment?" He simply goes on to his next patient and has his appointment secretary take note of the patient who failed to keep the appointment. The patient may find it harder the next time to see the doctor. He broke an informal contract. According to the Bible, however, the Lord asks: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" (Isaiah 49:15) The Bible indicates the covenant is more like the ties of a parent to her child than it is a doctor's appointment. If a child fails to show up for dinner, the parent's obligation, unlike the doctor's, isn't canceled. The parent finds out where the child is and makes sure he's cared for. "One member's failure does not destroy the relationship. A covenant puts no conditions on faithfulness. It is the unconditional commitment to love and serve." --Bruce Shelley.

So we see in today's story, the story of the righteousness of Abram. It is a wonder to be sure, to be righteous before God. It's hard to define the biblical theological word

righteousness. It sounds so holy and we are so far from it, it's hard to get our minds around this concept. Unless of course, we use some help. Listen to this from the NASB,

"For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith." Rom. 4:13

Now listen to this same text from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, which is a modern paraphrase of the New Testament. "That famous promise God gave Abraham- that he and his children would possess the earth- was not given because of something Abraham did or would do. It was based on God's decision to put everything together for him, which Abraham then entered when he believed." Righteousness is God's decision to put everything together for us, or maybe simpler put, being in right standing with God. Righteousness then is a gift. So we read in Paul's letter following our text today, "For what does the Scripture say? 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, 'Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.' and he received the sign of circumcision. This is a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised. This results in that righteousness might be reckoned to them, For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. Therefore also it was reckoned to him as righteousness. For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One,

Jesus Christ. So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men." (Romans 4.5, 6, 9, 11, 13, 22; 5.17)

Faith

So then, righteousness, or right standing with God is a veritable gift of God. What joy. But let me show you something that is equally joy bringing. It is how we receive the righteousness of God. We read again in Gen. 15, verse 6 "Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." Amazing... it is faith or belief in the Lord himself which is accounted to us as right standing with Him." In other words, the accounting principle is based on faith.

You know what has been going on in the economic world, don't you? Margins have been adjusted, earnings have been claimed years earlier than reality, and downright fiscal mismanagement and lying have ended careers, lopped billions of dollars of pensioners' funds and retirement accounts, and left the share markets in a bear for the first time since 1987. HIH, OneTel, WorldCom which owns Ozemail, and Enron are just a few of the players who have negotiated with accounting rules and even Arthur Anderson may yet face the legal music.

Reckoning is the bible term for *accounting*. So when we read here that "God reckoned faith to Abraham as righteousness" we might say a more Wall Street version, "God made His adjustment to the ledger, accounting what Abraham did as faith as if it were right standing with God." The ledger was adjusted from the red to the black. No amount of personal earnings were available to Abraham; only what God gave him. And thus we have the major principle of the Apostle Paul's future understanding of the

importance, no, dare I say, the preeminence of faith in the life of the follower of God. And Paul argues in Romans, this faith itself is a gift of God. (Romans 3, 23, 4:16 6.23, 9:32, 10:6)

Walter Kaiser wrote in his famed book *Toward an Old Testament Theology*. "Even before any technical vocabulary about entering into a covenant appeared, God promised to enter into a relationship with Abraham, and thereby to be and to do something for Abraham that would benefit both him and all the nations of the earth." (page 86 , 1978, Zondervan)

God's initiative

Before I lose you with all this technical data about faith and righteousness, and about what God is doing with us in bringing us close to Himself, let's look at whose idea this is and was from the beginning. Remember God initiated the whole relationship thing. He made man and woman. He made the Garden of Pleasure and He is now making covenant with Abram. You didn't choose God, my friends, He chose you. And to make this very clear to the folks in his day, Abram was given the covenant of the pieces. To you and to me, this is an odd ceremony. But if you have watched any opening or closing ceremonies of any Olympics or Commonwealth Games of late, this kind of animal rite shouldn't be so weird.

Verses 7-16 The opening statement is virtually identical to that of the Sinai which will take place later (Ex 20:2). "Ur of the Chaldeans" refers to 11:28 and 31, grounding the present covenant in a past act of divine salvation from "Babylon" (cf. Ex 20:2). The coming of God's presence in the awesome fire and darkness of Mount Sinai (Ex 19:18; 20:18; Deut. 4:11) appears to be intentionally foreshadowed in Abram's pyrotechnic vision (vv. 12, 17). In the Lord's words to Abram, the connection between Abram's covenant and the Sinai covenant is

explicitly made by means of the reference to the four hundred years of bondage of Abram's descendants and their subsequent exodus.

This scene including the sleep of Abram and the vision which results reflects Adam's rib removal ceremony and the later clarity of vision to the prophets.

The NIV Commentary says this on verse 17 and following: "The act of dividing the animals and walking through the parts was apparently an ancient form of contractual agreement (cf. Jer 34:18). While the meaning of the details may remain a mystery, fortunately the writer of Genesis has explained the custom: "On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram."

The sudden and solitary image of the birds of prey that Abram must drive away (v. 11) give a fleeting glimpse of the impending doom that awaits Abraham's seed but in the same moment points to the protective care of God's promises (cf. Mt 24:28). The imagery of the birds of prey surrounding the carcass is followed by a reference to the darkening of the sun (Ge 15:12; cf. Mt 24:29) and the promise of future redemption (Gen 15:14; Mt 24:30).

18-21 Moses again draws the promise of the land back into the narrative by concluding with a description of the geographical boundaries of the covenant land. The borders of the Promised Land appear to coincide with those of the Garden of Eden (cf. 2:10-14)."

All of this to indicate that it is God who initiates this covenant and it is therefore up to God to maintain it. No one of us can break this kind of agreement so badly that he will abandon us. God made covenant with Abram and those who follow after him, who have faith

like Abram and thereby enter into the lingering choral chords of the sounds of the covenant are equally maintained. What a blessing this is!

Summary

Y'shua, the son of Abraham (Matt. 1) is the Jewish messiah. He was the one who gave of His life to evil men, that we might share in his life and forgiveness. He was ever faithful to God and brought righteousness to man in a surprising manner. He died to exchange our sin for it. What a beautiful Messiah who gave His life for us, on the cross at Calvary in Jerusalem, 2000 years ago, so that we might get in on His blessings and life, that is, through a faith-filled relationship with Him. You didn't come up with this plan; God did!

God's word is true and faithful. The singular Seed, the Saviour has come. He who was the serpent bruiser who saves the Jewish people was born of a virgin, died for us.

Dear friends, we have eternal life due to the Saviour, due to His love and forgiveness. His Resurrection has proven His new covenant. His teaching is great, but it goes well beyond that to His life and death. No amount of good works will give us enough information to help us overcome evil. No amount of information will help us overcome our own evil inclination. Only the messiah can repair our relationship with God, which will in turn give us pleasure with Him.

If you have never experienced this eternal and new life about which we are speaking, if you are yet outside the relationship with God, then pray with me. If you haven't yet been restored into fellowship with Him, maybe God is removing a veil from you today. Won't you pray this prayer and ask God to forgive you of your sins, whatever they might be, and come home to pleasure with God?

Lord forgive me in the name of the Messiah, the Serpent Bruiser, Y'shua himself. Forgive me for all my sins, and make me clean again. Give me eternal life in the name of Y'shua and make me born again. I trust you.

Actual Text

Gen. 15:1 ¶ After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great."

Gen. 15:2 And Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what wilt Thou give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"

Gen. 15:3 And Abram said, "Since Thou hast given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir."

Gen. 15:4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir."

Gen. 15:5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

Gen. 15:6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Gen. 15:7 And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it."

Gen. 15:8 And he said, "O Lord GOD, how may I know that I shall possess it?"

Gen. 15:9 So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon."

Gen. 15:10 Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds.

Gen. 15:11 And the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.

Gen. 15:12 ¶ Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him.

Gen. 15:13 And God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.

Gen. 15:14 "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve; and afterward they will come out with many possessions.

Gen. 15:15 “And as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age.

Gen. 15:16 “Then in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete.”

Gen. 15:17 And it came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces.

Gen. 15:18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:

Gen. 15:19 the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite

Gen. 15:20 and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim

Gen. 15:21 and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite.”

Lot's backsliding (to finish in chapter 19):

- 1) 'Coattails faith', i.e. hanging on to Abram
- 2) Lot separated himself from brethren
- 3) Fighting with brethren
- 4) Chose the better places of life, had an earthly concern
- 5) Chose to pitch his tent toward Sodom, which is toward evil.
- 6) Moved into town and was then captured with Sodomite kings

There were 16 major social concerns in a covenant:

Major Social Concerns in the Covenant

1. Personhood

Everyone's person is to be secure (Ex 20:13; Dt 5:17; Ex 21:16-21, 26-31; Lev 19:14; Dt 24:7; 27:18).

2. False Accusation

Everyone is to be secure against slander and false accusation (Ex 20:16; Dt 5:20; Ex 23:1-3; Lev 19:16; Dt 19:15-21).

3. Woman

No woman is to be taken advantage of within her subordinate status in society (Ex 21:7-11, 20, 26-32; 22:16-17; Dt 21:10-14; 22:13-20; 24:1-5).

4. Punishment

Punishment for wrongdoing shall not be excessive so that the culprit is dehumanized (Dt 25:1-5).

5. Dignity

Every Israelite's dignity and right to be God's freedman and servant are to be honored and safeguarded (Ex 21:2, 5-6; Lev 25; Dt 15:12-18).

6. Inheritance

Every Israelite's inheritance in the promised land is to be secure (Lev 25; Nu 27:5-7; 36:1-9; Dt 25:5-10).

7. Property

Everyone's property is to be secure (Ex 20:15; Dt 5:19; Ex 21:33-36; 22:1-15; 23:4-5; Lev 19:35-36; Dt 22:1-4; 25:13-15).

8. Fruit of Labor

Everyone is to receive the fruit of his labors (Lev 19:13; Dt 24:14; 25:4).

9. Fruit of the Ground

Everyone is to share the fruit of the ground (Ex 23:10-11; Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; 25:3-55; Dt 14:28-29; 24:19-21).

10. Rest on Sabbath

Everyone, down to the humblest servant and the resident alien, is to share in the weekly rest of God's Sabbath (Ex 20:8-11; Dt 5:12-15; Ex 23:12).

11. Marriage

The marriage relationship is to be kept inviolate (Ex 20:14; Dt 5:18; see also Lev 18:6-23; 20:10-21; Dt 22:13-30).

12. Exploitation

No one, however disabled, impoverished, or powerless, is to be oppressed or exploited (Ex 22:21-27; Lev 19:14, 33-34; 25:35-36; Dt 23:19; 24:6, 12-15, 17; 27:18).

13. Fair Trial

Everyone is to have free access to the courts and is to be afforded a fair trial (Ex 23:6, 8; Lev 19:15; Dt 1:17; 10:17-18; 16:18-20; 17:8-13; 19:15-21).

14. Social Order

Every person's God-given place in the social order is to be honored (Ex 20:12; Dt 5:16; Ex 21:15, 17; 22:28; Lev 19:3, 32; 20:9; Dt 17:8-13; 21:15-21; 27:16).

15. Law

No one shall be above the law, not even the king (Dt 17:18-20).

16. Animals

Concern for the welfare of other creatures is to be extended to the animal world (Ex 23:5, 11; Lev 25:7; Dt 22:4, 6-7; 25:4).