

05: The Call of Abraham - Making a Covenant

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The fifteenth chapter of Genesis contains the first account of the covenant made with Abraham. "The word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not Abram; I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward."

Notice the statement that God said that He Himself was Abraham's reward. If we are Christ's, then we are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. Heirs of what? —"Heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ." Romans 8.17. The same inheritance is mentioned by the Psalmist: "The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance." So here again we have a link to connect all God's people with Abraham. Their hope is nothing else but the promise of God to him.

The promise, which God had made to Abraham, was not to him only, but to his seed as well. Therefore Abraham said to the Lord, "What wilt Thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house (or, "he that shall be possessor of mine house") is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abraham said, Behold, to me Thou hast given no seed; and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir." Abraham did not know the plan of the Lord. He knew the promise, and believed it but as he was old, and had no child, he supposed that the seed promised to him must come through his trusted servant. But that was not God's plan. Abraham was not to be the progenitor of a race of servants, but of free men.

"And, behold, the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them; and He said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness." Genesis 15.4-6

"And he believed in the Lord." The root of the verb rendered believed, is the word "Amen." Its idea is that of firmness, a foundation. When God spoke the promise, Abraham said "Amen," or, in other words, he built upon God, taking His word as a sure foundation. Compare this with Matthew 7.24, 25

God promised a great household to Abraham. But this house was to be built upon the Word of God, the Lord, and Abraham so understood it, and began at once to build. Jesus Christ is the foundation, for "other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." 1 Corinthians 3.11. The house of Abraham is the house of God, which is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone." Ephesians 2.20. "To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. Wherefore also it is contained in the Scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious; and he that believeth [buildeth] on Him shall not be confounded." 1 Peter 2.4-6

"Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness." Why? —Because faith means building upon God and His word, and that means the receiving of the life of God in His word. Note in the verses last quoted, from Peter that the foundation upon which the house is built is a living stone. The foundation is a living foundation, which gives life to those who come to it, so that the house, which is built upon it, is a living house. It grows by the life of the foundation. "Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established." In this text the words "believe" and "be established," are both from the one root, "Amen," and we might read it thus: "Build upon the Lord your God, so shall ye be built up." But the foundation upon which we build is righteous: "The Lord is upright; He is my Rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him." Therefore since faith means to build upon God and His holy word, it is self-evident that faith is righteousness to the one who possesses and exercises it.

Jesus Christ is the source of all faith. Faith has its beginning and end in Him. There can be no real faith that does not center in Christ. Therefore when Abraham believed in the Lord, he believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. God has never been revealed to man except. The fact that Abraham's belief was personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is further shown by the fact that it was counted unto him for righteousness. But there is no righteousness except through the faith of Jesus Christ. He "is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." 1 Corinthians 1.30. No righteousness will be of any worth at the appearing of the Lord except "that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith." Philippians 3.9. But since God himself counted Abraham's faith for righteousness, it is plain that his faith was centered in Christ alone, in whom he was made righteous.

And this demonstrates that the promise of God to Abraham was through Christ alone. The seed was that only which is through the faith of Christ, for Christ Himself is the seed. Abraham's posterity, that was to be as the stars for number, will be the innumerable host who wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb. The nations that were to come from him will be "the nations of them which are saved." Compare Matthew 8.11. "For how many so ever be the promises of God, in Him is the yea; wherefore also through Him is the Amen." 2 Corinthians 1.20, R.V.

"In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land," etc. Genesis 15.18. The making of this covenant is recorded in the preceding verses. First we have the promise of an innumerable posterity, and of land. God said, "I am the Lord, that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it." Verse 7. This verse must be kept in mind while reading verse 18, lest we get the wrong impression that there was something promised to Abraham's seed, which did not include him. "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made." Nothing was promised to the seed that was not also promised to Abraham.

Abraham believed the Lord, yet he said, "Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?" Then follows the record of the dividing of the heifer and the she goat and the ram. This is referred to in Jeremiah 34.18-20, when God reproveth the people for transgressing the covenant.

"And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him. And He said unto Abram, Know of a

surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge, and afterward they shall come out with great substance. And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full." Genesis 15.12-16

We have seen that this covenant was one of righteousness by faith. For the promised seed and the land were to be Abraham's through faith in God's word, which was counted to him for righteousness. Now let us see what more we can learn from the verses just quoted.

For one thing, we learn that Abraham was to die before the possession was bestowed. He was to die in a good old age, and his seed was to be a stranger in a foreign land for four hundred years.

Not only Abraham himself, but his immediate descendants also, would be dead before the seed should come into the land that was promised them. As a matter of fact, we know that Isaac died before the children of Israel went down into Egypt, and that Jacob and all his sons died in the land of Egypt.

"Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made." The chapter before us tells the same thing. It is evident that a promise made to the seed of Abraham cannot be fulfilled by bestowing the thing promised upon only a part of the seed; and that which was promised to Abraham and his seed cannot be fulfilled unless Abraham shares it as well as his seed.

What does this demonstrate? —Simply this, that the promise in the fifteenth chapter of Genesis, that Abraham and his seed should possess the land, had reference to the resurrection of the dead, and to nothing short of that. This is true, even though it should be claimed that the eighteenth verse excludes Abraham from the covenant there spoken of; for as we have seen, it is clear that many of the immediate descendants of Abraham would be dead before the time of the promise; and we know that Isaac and Jacob and the twelve patriarchs were dead long before that time.

Even if Abraham be left out of the question, yet the fact remains that the promise to the seed must include all of the seed, and not a part merely. But Abraham cannot be left out of the promise. Therefore we have positive evidence that in this chapter we have the record of the preaching of "Jesus and the resurrection" to Abraham.

To Be Fulfilled After the Resurrection

This enables us to understand why Stephen, when he was on his trial for preaching Jesus, began his talk with a reference to these very words. Speaking of Abraham's coming into the land of Canaan, he said that God "gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on; yet He promised that He would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child." Acts 7.5. In thus referring to this promise, which was well known to all the Jews, Stephen showed them most plainly that it could be fulfilled only by the resurrection of the dead through Jesus.

“And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.” From this we learn how it was that Abraham died in faith, although he had not received the promise. If he had expected to receive it in this present life, he would have been disappointed when death came before the fulfillment of the promise. But God plainly told him that he must die before it was fulfilled. Therefore since Abraham believed God, it is very clear that he understood about the resurrection, and looked for it. Yea, he triumphed in it. The resurrection of the dead, we shall see, was ever the central hope of the true children of Abraham.

But we learn something more. In the fourth generation, or after the lapse of four hundred years, his seed was to come out of bondage, into the Promised Land. Why could they not possess the land at once? —Because the iniquity of the Amorites was not then full. That shows that God would give the Amorites time to repent, or, failing that, to fill up the measure of their iniquity, and thus demonstrate their unfitness to possess the land.

And that teaches us further that the land, which God promised, to Abraham and his seed could be possessed only by righteous people. God would not cast out of the land those of whom there was any seeming prospect that they might become righteous. But the fact that the people who were to be destroyed from before the children of Abraham were to be cast out because of their wickedness shows that the possessors of the land were expected to be righteous. And thus we learn that the seed of Abraham, to whom the land was promised, were to be righteous people. This has already been shown by the fact that the seed was promised to Abraham only through the righteousness of faith.