

Trusting God

"The Covenant"

Genesis 15:1-21; Romans 4:1-3

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Through Abram's journey with God we have been learning who this God is. What an amazing God. We have learned that this is the God who calls. God is faithful to that call. We have learned that this is the God who makes promises which means that what is going on in life now is not permanent. It is not the way things will always be. There is always a future that is in God's hands that will flow back into the present and we get to live into it now. God will bring this to pass. We have also learned that this is the God who takes decisive action when the world is broken. Because of human sinfulness and a separation from God that ensues, God begins to act in human history. God acts by choosing one particular family through whom God is going to work salvation for the rest of the world. We call this God's election of Abram and Sarai.

Last week we learned that this election, this choosing is not a narrow thing, it's for everyone. Those who are chosen by God are not the privileged. They become those who are responsible to be those through whom God works. The point is this, however. This power of God that created the entire universe now becomes focused upon the work of salvation of the lost.

All of God's greatness and holiness is narrowed to a tiny point in the lives of one family. Today in this chapter, chapter 15 of Genesis, we will learn how God takes that salvation and begins to spread it out to the whole world. This is called, *"The Covenant."* That's how God works it.

We need to take a step back and see how this "Covenant" comes to pass. First of all, God reiterates the promise to Abram. It says he takes him by hand and says, "Come outside. I want you to see something." Note the personal nature of this. It isn't a voice from God speaking in Abram's tent saying, "Hey, by the way, go outside, would ya?" It says that the Lord took

him by the hand and took him outside the tent and said, “Look up at the heavens.”

When was the last time you spent any time away from the humidity of this part of the state and went to Eastern Washington or Oregon where it’s dry, on a moonless night in a place where there are no other lights? Have you ever been in such a place? If you haven’t, you need to. On a moonless night, look up and what do you see? It’s **astounding**! The glittering array of what God has made and the stars that are there if you tried to count them, you couldn’t.

Abram has asked God, “Lord, how are you going to work this work, this salvation; give us this land and bless all the families of the earth when I have no son?” And God says, “Look at the heavens. Abram, can you count those stars?” You can hear Abram saying, “No.” And then God says, “So shall your offspring be.” Look at the generosity of the heart of this God who is saying to Abram and through Abram is saying to all of us, “I am going to redeem billions and billions and billions of people.” Note what God does not say to Abram. He doesn’t say to him, “Abram, let me show you something. Look up, let me show you the constellation Orion...seven to ten stars.” If I were Abram I would have said, “Pretty good deal, I’ll take seven to ten.” No, God says, “Look up, look from this horizon to this; from that horizon to this horizon. Every star you can see is how many people I am going to redeem through you. One day, so shall your off-spring be.”

Then in Romans we hear from the Apostle Paul, that all of the descendents of Abram are those who are the descendents of faith. Did you know that this morning as you are in this place you are one of those stars? YOU are one of those descendents of Abram. How does that work? Through faith. Note that the passage says, “After God shows him the stars and says so shall your descendents be.” Abram (who is very elderly at this point) it says he believed God and God credited to him as righteousness.

Sometimes I don’t know if we understand that that action between Abram and God is one of the hinges on which the world turns. There aren’t very many of them. That’s one of them.

Do you remember Adam and Eve—God said to them, “You can eat from any tree in the garden; don’t eat from this tree in the garden.” In order for them to obey God they had to take God at his word. And they couldn’t. And they wouldn’t. When they were tempted the tempter said, “Has God

really said what God said?"...and then twisted God's word. And Adam and Eve in being tempted into sin went against God's word. They couldn't take God at his word. And here you see Abram through whom the tide is being reversed.

When he is told something by God, he believes it. And God says, "What you get in exchange for that faith is righteousness; is the righteous, holy life of God given to you as a gift." Let's remember just a few things about faith, because this doesn't come out of the blue. This is not the first time Abram has had a conversation with God. Or has had an experience of the power, the righteousness, the goodness, the reality of this God who is revealing himself to the whole world through him. He has been around the block many times with God up to this point; which is to say, faith takes some time.

Faith does involve knowing some things about God and knowing some things about the Bible. When people say to me, "Where can I get faith?" I say, "You know there are some things you can learn." It's important to understand that one aspect of faith is the content of the faith. That's a good thing to learn. But that's not all there is. Abram had been learning much about God. He hadn't gotten to this point yet.

Then there's another step. It's assent, or agreement to what we learn where we say, "Yeah, I agree with that. I have some questions, but it's making sense to me." That in and of itself is not faith either. It's one aspect of faith, but then there comes a time when a person is able to say, "I really trust God. I'm willing to take my life, the life of my family and I'm willing to say, here God, I am placing my life upon the weight of your word." It's called TRUST; when we relinquish our lives to God. That's what Abram does here. Based upon God's word, based upon everything else in his experience up to this point, he is able to say, "I will take you at your word." And then God says, "And that's what righteousness comes from." It's faith.

Then Abram says, "OK, thank you very much, I do believe you, but how can I know that this is going to happen?" And God says, "OK, here's what I want you to do. Go get a goat, some rams, some birds..." and Abram knows exactly what's going on. God is making a covenant with him.

Let me explain what a covenant is and how it operated in that day and age. Here's the way covenants were made in Abram's lifetime. They had been made this way for a long time before and they were going to be made

for a long time after that. When you made an agreement with someone, let's say you were buying some property from them, you went and you negotiated a deal and came up with a price, you have a buyer and a seller and you say, "I'll buy it for this, you sell me for this," it's a piece of property. Then here's what you would do. You would make a covenant. You would take some animals and sacrifice them, and then you would cut them in two. You take the animals and spread them apart. Then both parties to the agreement would, at the same time, in front of witnesses, say, "I promise to keep the covenant I have made with you." And as both pass between the two animals that had been cut in two, they were saying, "May it happen to me as it has happened to that dead animal if I don't follow through on my part of the agreement." Does that make sense?

I spoke with Dennis Gish this last week. Dennis is in the Title business and I said, "How differently arranged our Title offices would be if this were still in place!" There would be some drains in the room. And he said, "Yeah, how different that would be, but how few problems we would have afterward." And Abram knows that God is about to make a covenant with him. That's why Abram takes the animals and cuts them in two. What he thinks is that he and God are going to pass through those animals.

Here's what's happened. Yes, Abram takes God at his word, but God then says, "I want to show you that my word is good." God is sealing his word with something that Abram can see, and smell, and experience as a confirmation of what God has promised. But then, before Abram can walk through those pieces of animal that are cut and separated, he falls into a deep sleep. And in that sleep, here's what happens—this is one of the most amazing stories in the Bible! He falls asleep, and in this sleep trance kind of experience with God where God is speaking with him, he sees a smoking pot and a torch pass between the two pieces of the animal. Do you know what that means? That means that God alone is fulfilling the agreement that he is making with Abram. Abram is in nothing but deep sleep and watches as God takes upon himself the binding nature of the covenant. This is God saying to Abram and to everyone who would be one of Abram's descendents, "You do nothing but receive what I give."

And what does God give us in the covenant he makes with Abram, but his very self. We call this, grace. God is saying to Abram, "Yeah, there are some things you are supposed to do, but I will bear the burden of the responsibility for all of it. I hope you don't fail, but if you fail in the covenant, in being a part with me and walking with me and being bound to

me in such a way that your life is transformed and the world is saved, if you fail, I will never fail.” And lo and behold, that’s what happens throughout the rest of the Old Testament.

The people of the covenant, the descendents of Abram, fail again and again and again and again. Do you know what God does? Every single time God says, “I am faithful. I will pick you up. I will follow through on the covenant to love you and be your God forever, and ever, and ever.”

And so there came a day, in order to fulfill the covenant so that those billions of stars could shine with the grace of God flowing through their spiritual veins for the life of the world, when Jesus came to the end of his ministry and he came to a table like this table, and he said, “I have spoken God’s word to you, and I have lived God’s word before you; I am God’s speech to you. You, my disciples, are willing to take me at my word, but now I want to prove it, by myself, being that person who follows through on the covenant to the point of death so that you may have life.” That is what this table is about.

It wasn’t Jesus saying the old covenant didn’t work, so we better start a new one. It was Jesus saying, “No, now I’m going to take that covenant and fulfill it for all time.” And so as we come to this table today we come to this same Lord who assures us of his love for us and **seals** in this sacrament so we will know forever that his word is true, seals in this sacrament with his very own life, the truth of God’s grace given us in Jesus Christ. So once again, I invite you who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, to come to this table. God credits that to you as righteousness. And so, come. Come, those of you who have been to this table often. Come to this table you who may not have been in a very long time. Come to this table you whose faith is strong, but also come to this table at his invitation you whose faith is weak. Come to this table once again, you who have been following Jesus as a faithful disciple. Come to this table at His invitation, those of you who in following, have failed. For this is the table of the Lord. The one who takes upon himself our weakness, our burdens, and then gives us joy. This is the one who takes upon himself our sins and gives us righteousness in return.