

God's Covenant with Abraham

Gen 15:1-6, 17-21

SS Lesson for 10/01/2017

Devotional Scripture: Ps 105:6-14

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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson illustrates the major components of **God's Covenant with Abraham**. The **study's aim** is to sense the degree of faith Abram needed to believe God's Covenant with him. The **study's application** is to believe God's promises to us even though their fulfillment seems impossible. **NOTE:** A major part of this lesson was copied from a previous Sunday School Lesson dated 03/15/2009.

(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: Gen 15:18

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates"

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

After Abram's rescue of Lot and blessing from Melchizedek, the Lord formally made a covenant with Abram, thereby confirming the promise given earlier (12:2-3). God warned, however, that there would be a long period of enslavement (15:13).

15:1-3. Before God made the covenant, He set aside Abram's fear and doubt by a word of assurance: **Do not be afraid. I am your Shield.** When **the LORD** promised **Abram** that his **reward** would be **great**, the patriarch immediately asked **what** he would receive since he was **childless**. This shows his faith. His vision was not blinded by Bera's offer (14:22-24); **Abram** still had only one hope, the original promise God had given (12:2-3). His concern was expressed by a marvelous word play on his household servant's origin: this **Eliezer of Damascus** (*Dammešeq*) is the possessor-heir (*ben mešeq*, lit., "son of possession") of **my estate** (15:2). It is as if Abram was stressing to God that "the omen is in the nomen"—a mere **servant** would become his **heir**.

15:4-6. But **the LORD** strongly answered, **This man** (not even using Eliezer's name) **will not be your heir**. Instead **a son coming from Abram's own body** would be his **heir**. God then showed Abram **the stars**, pointing out that Abram's **offspring** would be just as innumerable (cf. 22:17; 26:4). The word by which God created the stars would also guarantee Abram's seed. **Abram believed** (lit., "believed in") **the LORD and He credited... to him ... righteousness**. This foundational truth is repeated three times in the New Testament (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; James 2:23) to show that righteousness is reckoned in return for faith. Genesis 15:6 provides an important note, but it does not pinpoint Abram's conversion. That occurred years earlier when he left Ur. (The form of the Heb. word for "believed" shows that his faith did *not* begin after the events recorded in vv. 1-5.) Abram's faith is recorded here because it is foundational for making the covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant did not give Abram redemption; it was a covenant made with Abram who had already believed and to whom righteousness had already been imputed. The Bible clearly teaches that in all ages imputed righteousness (i.e., salvation) comes by faith.

15:7-10. In the solemn ceremony in which **the LORD** made a binding covenant with **Abram**, God assured him of the ultimate fulfillment of His promises (vv. 7, 18-21). God also declared that there would be a long 400-year period of enslavement for Abram's descendants (vv. 13-16). Obeying God's instructions, **Abram** severed in **half** (v. 10) three animals—a **heifer, a goat, and a ram** (v. 9)—and also brought **a dove and a young pigeon**.

15:11-16. Just then sudden horror must have come on **Abram**, for unclean **birds of prey** swooped **down on** the offering animals—obviously an evil omen. God's announcement of Israel's enslavement (vv. 13-14) clarified the meaning of the attacking birds. The word **mistreated** (*'anāh*, v. 13; cf. 16:6) is the same word used in Exodus 1:11-12 to describe Egypt's oppression of Israel. Egypt, like birds of prey, opposed the covenant, but ultimately the covenant will be fulfilled. Later, in Moses' day when the Israelites were in Egypt, they could count the years and see that **400 years** had elapsed (from the time of Jacob's entry into Egypt in 1876 B.C.; cf. the chart "Chronology of the Patriarchs," near Gen. 47:28-31) and their time of deliverance from slavery was at hand (**they will come out**). Exodus 12:40 and Galatians 3:17 state that the Egyptian bondage was 430 years (from 1876 to 1446). Apparently, then, Genesis 15:13 and Acts 7:6, with their references to 400 years, are using rounded figures (see Acts 7:6 and Gal. 3:17). God is just, and wished to permit **the sin of the Amorites** to be **full** before He would judge them (Gen. 15:16). (God would

tolerate their sins until Israel under Joshua conquered Palestine. Thus the fulfillment of the promises to Abram involves a retributive judgment on the inhabitants of the land of Canaan. Abram's seed would get the land—but not one hour before absolute justice required it. God had much to do before fulfilling His promise—including disciplining His nation to make it fit for receiving the promise. Abram's seeing this in advance was horrible—like watching birds of prey.

15:17-21. Then after sunset God revealed Himself in connection with the image of an oven (**smoking fire pot**) and a **torch**, two elements that were connected with sacrificial ritual in the ancient world. These images are part of the “burning” motif that describes God's zeal and judgment in the world. Fire represents the consuming, cleansing zeal of Yahweh as well as His unapproachable holiness, which are interrelated (cf. Isa. 6:3-7). In the **darkness** (Gen. 15:17) **Abram** saw nothing else in the vision except these fiery elements that **passed between the pieces** of the slaughtered animals. Thus the holy God was zealous to judge the nations and to fulfill His covenantal promises to Israel. He came down and **made** (lit, “cut”) a formal treaty (**a covenant**) **with Abram** (the Abrahamic Covenant). Since God could “swear” (confirm the covenant) by none greater, “He swore by Himself” (Heb. 6:13). In other words this was a unilateral covenant. So its promises are absolutely sure. God even specified the geographical boundaries of Israel's land—**from the river of Egypt** (Wadi el-Arish, not the Nile River) **to the great river, the Euphrates**. Israel has never possessed this land in its entirety, but she will when Christ returns to reign as Messiah. The Canaanite tribes listed (Gen. 15:19-21) were dispossessed later in the Conquest. For Abram God's message was clear: in spite of the prospects of death and suffering (enslavement in bondage), his descendants would receive the promises, for God assured it. So Israel could be encouraged by this at the Exodus as well as in subsequent times of distress, even during the Babylonian Captivity. God's solemn covenant assures the Chosen People of the ultimate fulfillment of His promises in spite of their times of death and suffering. Israel would also notice the parallel touch at the beginning of this narrative. (Cf. “I am the LORD [Yahweh] who brought you out of Ur,” v. 7, with Ex. 20:2: “I am the LORD [Yahweh] your God who brought you out of Egypt.”) This assured Israel that in spite of opposition and bondage God would judge their enslavers and fulfill His promises. This passage encourages New Testament believers as well. God affirms solemnly that He will fulfill His promises concerning salvation and all the blessings that pertain to that life (cf. 2 Peter 1:3-4); despite opposition, suffering, and even death, He keeps His promises.

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

We move now from the signs of God's covenant to what it means to be called into a covenant with God, including not only the divine side of the covenant (God's promises) but also the human side (what God wants from us). How do we fulfill God's covenant? How do we walk with God in a covenantal relationship? Once again a covenant with God is a special kind of agreement, part of which spells out obligations specified by God. When we make covenantal oaths like in a wedding ceremony, we make promises to God. We are to fulfill these promises under the watchful eye of God. So all of us must take biblical covenants very seriously. The text involves God's covenant with Abram, early on in the story of his life (later he would be renamed Abraham). At this point in the narrative, Abram had responded to God's call and had migrated into the land to which God had called him. God promised him a land to possess and descendants (seed) to fill it. Abram certainly did not have a clear understanding of what it all meant at first. From our vantage point, we can see that God's call of Abram was part of His irrevocable and sovereign plan to bring a Saviour into the world to bring the blessing of salvation to all nations. Abram accepted the promise of a land and a people. This faith was counted for righteousness before God (Gen. 15:6), but there was still much growth and understanding to come. God intended to use Abram as a mighty instrument in accomplishing His plan. It took time and much spiritual growth for Abram to fully embrace this, as we learn from reading his story. Part of fulfilling our side of being in a covenant with God is the realization that we are His instruments in the world. It is tempting to look just at God's side of it, seeing and receiving that which He is promising to us in salvation. But God's covenant includes even more than the gift and promise of salvation, as wonderful and significant as that is. The moment we become part of God's covenant people, we become instruments in His hands to fulfill His purposes. What does it mean to walk with God in covenant? Certainly, it means we acknowledge Him as our Saviour. We receive the gift of His salvation. But it also means that we become His instruments, just as Abram did—instruments who fulfill His plan and purpose and render glory to Him. How are we doing on that part of it? It takes time and spiritual growth for us to fully see all that God wants to do in and through our lives. We begin our Christian journey as baby Christians, very dependent on others and very centered on ourselves. In time we see that we also have a calling to learn and fulfill God's plan for our lives. By faith we grow in our understanding of how and where God is leading us. Let us not stop growing on the day of our salvation! Let us realize that

the day of our salvation is just the beginning of a journey in which we learn to be useful to God. May we, like our spiritual father Abraham, be greatly used of God!

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

In 1984, the Kansas City Royals wanted to keep star third baseman George Brett on the team. To do so, they negotiated a rather odd contract. First, the Royals agreed to give Brett the bat he used in the infamous 1983 “pine tar game,” when his go-ahead home run was ruled an out (a decision later reversed) because he allegedly had too much pine tar on his bat. Second, the contract also gave Brett part ownership of an apartment complex in Memphis! While we may never sign an agreement giving us a baseball bat and buildings, we are familiar with contracts. Whether we call an agreement a contract, a pledge, or a covenant, the sealing of promises has always been an essential element of society. This lesson looks at a covenant, not between people, but between a person and God.

God’s covenant with Abraham began when the Lord called him (at the time known as Abram) to leave his homeland and move to unfamiliar surroundings (Genesis 12:1). Abraham obeyed “even though he did not know where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8). The year was about 2000 BC. Though Abraham’s initial obedience was exemplary, his faith journey was not without bumps. By the end of the same chapter in which Abraham left his homeland in response to God’s call, he had passed off his wife Sarah (known as Sarai at that stage) as his sister in order to gain favorable treatment from Pharaoh in Egypt (Genesis 12:10-13). Abraham also had to deal with certain problems involving his nephew Lot, who had chosen to live in the vicinity of Sodom (Genesis 13:5-13). When Sodom became entangled in a regional war between coalitions of kings, Lot was captured (14:1-12). Abraham had to lead a commando raid to defeat a coalition and rescue Lot (14:13-16). Following this victory, Abraham was met by Melchizedek, who was “king of Salem” and “priest of God Most High” (14:18). He blessed Abraham, and in return Abraham gave him a tenth of the spoils taken in battle (14:19, 20).

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Covenant Promises Misunderstood (Gen 15:1-3)

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."

2 But Abram said, "Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"

3 Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!"

Misunderstood reward (1)

Misunderstanding and using human logic to resolve (Gen 16:1-2)

1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; 2 so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said.

Misunderstanding the full meaning of a child as a reward (Ps 127:3)

3 Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him.

Misunderstandings and afraid to ask about them (Luke 9:44-45)

44 "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men." 45 But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

Misunderstanding about the actions of God (John 13:6-9)

6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8 "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." 9 "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

Misunderstanding and worrying versus seeking God (Matt 6:33-34)

33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Misunderstood timing (2-3)

God's timing is different because of His superior ways and authority (Isa 55:8-9)

8 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. 9 "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

God's timing is different because He is not limited by time (2 Pet 3:8)

8 But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

There is a time for everything, but all of it is up to God (Eccl 3:1)

3 There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven:

God does things when the time has fully come (Gal 4:4)

4 But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law,

Timing half understood but not fulfilled (Acts 7:5)

5 He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child.

Timing deferred (Prov 13:12)

12 Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

It is not for man to know God's timing (Acts 1:7)

7 He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

Covenant Promises Assurances (Gen 15:4-6)

4 And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir."

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."

6 And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

Promises of heirship (4)

An heir through God's promises (1 Kings 8:20)

20 "The Lord has kept the promise he made: I have succeeded David my father and now I sit on the throne of Israel, just as the Lord promised, and I have built the temple for the Name of the Lord, the God of Israel.

An heir through succession (1 Chron 17:11)

11 When your days are over and you go to be with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom.

An heir through God's covenant (Ps 89:28-29)

28 I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail. 29 I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure.

An heir through God's oath (Ps 132:11)

11 The Lord swore an oath to David, a sure oath that he will not revoke: "One of your own descendants I will place on your throne

An heir through prophesied genealogy (Isa 11:1-2)

1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. 2 The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord

Promises that are sure (5)

God's promises are sure because of the proof of His mighty acts (Ps 145:10-13)

0 All you have made will praise you, O Lord; your saints will extol you. 11 They will tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, 12 so that all men may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. 13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made.

God's promises are sure because by His words the creation was done (2 Peter 3:4-9)

4 They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." 5 But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. 6 By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. 7 By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. 8 But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

God's promises are sure because His Divine creation proves His eternal power (Rom 1:20)

20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

God's promises are sure because God cannot lie (Heb 6:13-19)

13 When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, 14 saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants." 15 And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. 16 Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. 17 Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. 18 God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. 19 We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

God's promises are sure because His faithfulness surrounds Him (Ps 89:6-8)

Who is like the Lord among the heavenly beings? 7 In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him. 8 O Lord God Almighty, who is like you? You are mighty, O Lord, and your faithfulness surrounds you.

God's promises are sure because His promises have been thoroughly tested (Ps 119:140)

140 Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them.

Promises that can be believed (6)

God's promises can be believed through faith (Rom 4:3-5)

3 What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." 4 Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. 5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

God's promises can be believed because there is a blessing in having faith in them (Gal 3:6-9)

6 Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." 7 Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. 8 The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." 9 So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith

God's promises can be believed through obedience (Heb 11:8-9)

8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

God's promises can be believed through faith and action working together (James 2:20-24)

20 You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21 Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. 24 You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

God's promises can be believed because of His eternal presence (2 Cor 4:13-14)

13 It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, 14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.

Promises that strengthens (6)

Our faith must be based on God's power (1 Cor. 2:5)

5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

The result of our faith should be action (2 Cor. 4:13)

13 It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak,

It is not the size of "our" faith, it is the power of God, the object of our faith (Luke 17:5-6)

5 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6 He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.

Even in faith, we need encouragement (Romans 1:12)

12 that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

Anything not of faith is sin (Romans 14:23)

23 But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Covenant Promises Affirmed (Gen 15:17-21)

17 And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces.

18 On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates —

19 the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites,

20 the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,

21 the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."

Affirming the right time (17)

Led to the right place and the right time by believing in God's directions (Gen 22:2-5)

2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." 3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5 He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

Led to the right place and the right time by being obedient (Acts 8:26-29)

26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road — the desert road — that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

Led to the right place and the right time by Divine guidance (Acts 16:6-10)

6 Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. 7 When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. 8 So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. 9 During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Led to the right place and the right time to accomplish a specific purpose (Est 4:12-14)

12 When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, 13 he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 14 For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

Led to the right place and the right time by God's arrangement (1 Cor 12:18)

18 But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

Affirming the inheritance (18-21)

An inheritance of God's kingdom (Luke 12:32)

32 "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.

An inheritance because of being an heir (Rom 8:17)

17 Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

An inheritance of the crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8)

8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

An inheritance for those who are poor in the eyes of the world (James 2:5)

5 Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

An inheritance that can never perish (1 Pet 1:3-4)

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you,

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

Conclusion

The bottom line for Abram was that God's promise was now much more specific. Abram would have a son of his own through whom blessings would be poured out. Abram's offspring would be very numerous and, in time, would possess the land. But before this, they would go through a time of delay and great difficulty.

The essence of Abram's faith was that while he waited for the promise of future blessings, he was content in the meantime with the presence of God. Abram did not come out on the short end of the stick. Abram's great reward was God Himself: "I am a shield to you; your very great reward" (Genesis 15:1, NASV, marginal reading).

Our theology has been greatly distorted in recent days. We are invited to come to Christ as Savior because of all that He can and will do for us. We may have come to Him for His presents, rather than His presence.

Abram was neither cheated nor short-changed in the delay of God and in the difficulties he and his offspring faced. Abram was blessed, for if God is our portion, that is enough.

The day before I delivered this message I performed the funeral for one of the young women in our church. She was a lovely young woman, a model wife and mother. She was twenty-eight years old when she died in her sleep. We still do not know the medical explanation for her death.

For the funeral message, I chose Psalm 73 as the text. In it the psalmist confesses his perplexity at the fact that so often the righteous seem to suffer (verse 14) while the wicked prosper (verses 3-12). When the writer looks at the eternal destiny of man, he realizes that God ultimately sets matters straight. The requirements of justice are often not fully met until eternity is entered. Heaven and hell are thus required by righteousness. Without them, justice is not satisfied.

This leads the psalmist to the conclusion that the ultimate good in life is not freedom from pain of suffering or poverty, but knowing God:

Nevertheless I am continually with Thee; Thou hast taken hold of my right hand. With Thy counsel Thou wilt guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.... But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all Thy works (Psalm 73:23-26, 28).

Here, then, is the key to understanding the blessing that is to be found in delay and difficulty: while prosperity often leads us away from God (cf. Psalm 73:7-12), affliction draws us closer (Psalm 73:25-26).

If nearness to God is the highest good, then suffering is good also, if it enhances our intimacy with Him. And prosperity is evil if it inclines us away from the good of knowing God.

That, I believe, is the key to Genesis chapter 15. Abram's faith is strengthened by specific revelation concerning his son and the soil his offspring will inherit. But even beyond this, he is brought to the realization that faith cannot be separated from suffering, for God uses this to draw men into intimate fellowship with Himself.

Faith is seldom strengthened by success (cf. verse 1), but by believing God in the midst of delays and difficulties.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a

charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, 'For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31-39).

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.' It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed (Hebrews 12:1-13).

(Adapted from URL: <https://bible.org/seriespage/focal-point-abram%E2%80%99s-faith-genesis-151-21>)

Heart of the Lesson from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

When God makes a covenant with man, He always keeps His end of the bargain. Numerous times in the Bible, God reminded His people that He would never leave them or forsake them. Even this promise points back to the initial covenant between Abram and God.

God's promise (Gen. 15:1-5). God came to Abram in a vision and told him that he had no need to fear because God was his shield and reward. Abram, being a realist, pointed out to the omnipotent God that He had not given him the key component of His original promise—an heir (cf. 12:2-3). What was Abram really saying to God? "I am glad that You are my reward, but You have not given me the most important part of your first promise to me. My true desire is for a son." Abram made his requests known to God. Abram wanted a son, an heir. God responded by informing Abram that he would have an heir—a son from his own loins. And from that son, his descendants would be as numerous as the stars.

Abram's faith (Gen. 15:6). Almost hidden in this chapter is this truly significant verse: "And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness." Abram believed God. The Scripture does not give any indication that Abram protested or wavered with what God told him. Instead, he believed God. How would your life change if, when you read the Bible, you believed it? What if the words penetrated your heart to such a degree that they ignited faith, hope, and love in the one, true God? What if you had a vision from heaven saying that God was calling you to change the world? Would you believe God, or would you react like Sarai? When she heard that she would be pregnant, she laughed! Abram did not have thousands of years of testimonies to fall back on. All he had was the words that God spoke to him in a vision. Abram chose to believe God, and God considered him a righteous man because of it. Abram set the pattern for each of us. If we believe God and His Word, He will credit our account with righteousness too.

God's confirmation (Gen. 15:17-21). Abram was a practical businessman. He was aware that God had just made him a promise. Abram believed the promise, but he wanted something to solidify the deal. In other words, the paperwork was all drawn up, but God had not yet signed on the dotted line. God told Abram to prepare a "heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon" (vs. 9). Abram prepared the animals for sacrifice but did not create a fire on the altar. Instead, God caused him to fall into a deep sleep. God told Abram of the future, the trouble the Israelites would have in Egypt, and assured him of their deliverance. Then, when the sun went down and it became dark, Abram

watched as a smoking firepot and a flaming torch passed between the divided carcasses. God signed the dotted line with fire. God came and ignited the animals prepared for sacrifice as a sign to Abram that He would do just what He said. Our God is an all-consuming fire. He keeps His promises. All He really asks of us is to believe Him, trust Him, and love Him. Choose this day to believe God again for the desires of your heart, and watch Him keep His word.

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Most Bible students are aware of how Abraham is highlighted in Scripture because of his faith. Abraham's faith takes up more verses in Hebrews 11 (commonly called "the faith chapter") than anyone else's. Yet Abraham's faith clearly was not perfect. In addition to problems noted in the Lesson Background, today's lesson reveals the man expressing concerns as to whether God will keep his promise of offspring. Abraham then voiced a desire for some kind of guarantee that God would fulfill the promise of land. So where is this man's exemplary faith? The Bible does not hide the weaknesses or failures of even its staunchest heroes and heroines of faith. As Abraham had his struggles, so did Moses (Numbers 11:10-15), Miriam (Numbers 12), Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-4, 14), John the Baptist (Matthew 11:1-6), and Peter (Matthew 26:69-75). Such examples can be a source of encouragement when our faith walk is more of a limp. At such times we are in good company. These individuals did not stagnate. The Abraham who stumbled at times eventually became the Abraham willing to place his son on the sacrificial altar in obedience to God's command; the Peter who denied Jesus eventually became the Peter who died a martyr's death; etc. Abraham was not a man of perfect faith. Yet never is the statement of Genesis 15:6 revoked: "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness."

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

1. God constantly assures us that we have nothing to fear (Gen. 15:1)
2. Believers can take their most difficult questions and stubborn problems straight to God (vss. 2-3)
3. No matter how bleak your circumstances appear, rest assured that God's plan for your life will not be derailed (vss. 4-5)
4. Our relationship with God is based on our faith in Him—not our actions (vs. 6)
5. God's covenant is confirmed by His righteous character and power (vs. 17)
6. Seeing what God has done gives us confidence to believe Him for what we have yet to see (vss. 18-21)