

When we faithfully struggle to believe in God and his word, God responds by explaining how he will accomplish his promises, which he guaranteed by making a covenant with us that he will keep upon pain of his own death. God has proven absolutely trustworthy, so you can and must trust him absolutely.

Introduction: There is no shortage of quotes on the subject of trust. Everyone seems to know what it is. Far fewer actually live and experience it.

Background: This passage is a high point in the Bible. The LORD has called Abraham out of his homeland away from his family, his culture, and his gods. At that time God gave him an astonishing promise of a seed, a land, and a blessing (Gen 12:1-3). This is known as the Abrahamic promise. It governs the ways God works in redemptive history throughout the rest of the Bible and even today. In Genesis 15 the LORD solemnly confirms and strengthens the Genesis 12 promise in a dramatic divine encounter with Abraham.

I. Ask God for Assurance

A. Abraham's first question: Who will be my heir? (vv. 2-3)

Abraham has a big problem because he has no son. His birth name "Abram" (meaning Exalted Father) was surely a source of frustration. God had promised to make his name great by making of him a great nation (Gen 12:2). Even so, life is not going as planned. Without a natural heir, Abraham is getting anxious. His current heir is a household servant named Eliezer from Damascus. Abraham even jokes with God that Eliezer's full name ironically sounds like "son of my acquisition." Abraham cannot understand how he will become an exalted father without a natural born son. He needs some assurance of God's promise. Abraham fears God's promise will be buried with him.

B. Abraham's second question: How will my family possess this land? (v. 8)

Abraham has another big problem because he's an immigrant with no land. Surrounding him are people groups that are settled and thriving in cities ruled by kings, but Abraham lives in tents with his wife and servants out in the country. He's not poor, powerless, or invisible, but he is an outsider who is vastly outnumbered by the land's indigenous citizens. Even if God does give him a son, how in the world will his descendants come to possess the land? The prospect seems outlandish (pardon the pun!). Considering the way things are going, Abraham would like to know how he will possess it. Some more information would go a long way toward answering his nagging questions. Abraham fears his descendants will never be powerful or numerous enough to possess the land.

II. Consider God's Revealed Plan

A. God's first answer: Your own flesh and blood son (v. 4)

God explicitly denies Eliezer will be the heir. Instead a flesh and blood son will be born to Abraham. Notice the way Abraham hears God: "the word of the LORD came to him." This phrase is a common biblical formula that precedes a prophetic message. God has elevated his promise to a prophecy, and Abraham is his prophetic messenger. This word from God must be publicly shared. Abraham now has specific (but not comprehensive) information that gives him a great deal of assurance in God's promise. Knowing some details of God's plan increases his ability to trust God.

B. God's second answer: Through centuries of affliction and oppression (vv. 7, 9-15)

Again God answers Abraham's question by revealing his plan. Abraham cannot fathom how his descendants will come to possess the land, so God explains how it will come to pass so Abraham will know for certain. But it is a frightful plan. Abraham will die at a good old age without taking possession. Instead his descendants will be

sojourners and servants in a foreign land for 400 years where they will be afflicted and oppressed. Their plight will cause them to feel terror and great darkness, something like Abraham's nightmare. At the end of it all God will judge the oppressing nation and bring out Abraham's children. Their reward for suffering slavery will be to come out with great possessions. God will not give Abraham's people the land until the Amorites (all the indigenous peoples in the land) have reached their full measure of sin. In 400 years God will justly dispossess the Amorites of the land and graciously deliver the land to Abraham's people to possess.

III. Believe God's Covenant Promise

A. Because God counts faith as righteousness (vv. 5-6)

It's the "right" thing to do. How does one gain God's approval? By being counted as righteous (Ps 1). What is the righteous work God requires? Belief in God (cf. Jn 6:28-29). How will the righteous live? Not by works of the law but by faith (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11). God wants you to believe his covenant promise. Faith—to believe him and believe in him—is the only way to God counting you as righteous.

B. Because God will be faithful unto death (vv. 1, 17-21)

1. In verse 17 the final stage of the ritual begins. The LORD appears to Abraham in a deep sleep. Abraham's terror and great darkness is realized when God manifests himself as a smoking fire pot and flaming torch that pass between the animal pieces. These symbols communicate God's blazing holiness, zealous righteousness, and terrifying justice. This scene, on a smaller scale like those strategic maps in the war room, would have reminded Israel of the LORD's act of deliverance from Egypt (cf. Ex 13:21-22; 19:18; 20:18).

2. But it's not just a prophetic pre-enactment of the exodus. God is also in effect signing a contract in his own blood. Usually when covenant parties ratify an agreement, they both pass together through the animal pieces, thereby taking a "self-maledictory" oath. In essence, the covenant parties declare "may this same thing happen to me—be torn apart—if I do not fulfill my covenant promise." But this time, the LORD alone passes between the animal pieces. The LORD alone takes the oath (Jer 34:18-21; cf. Heb 6:13-20)! God swears the promise is conditioned upon his own faithfulness. It's a unilateral promise. God guarantees his covenant promise to his people upon pain of his own death. And of course God will have to die to keep his promise. Because we have been lawbreakers, idolaters, and faithless sinners, God must find a way to both deal righteously with our sin and keep his promise. This is why God sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world, to be killed like those animals, so we would certainly inherit the promise. God will be Abraham's shield and the one to reward him greatly. The only sensible response to God's gracious promise is thankful trust.

Conclusion: In this covenant God made when he appeared to Abraham, he promised offspring and land. In the new covenant Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of these promises. Jesus Christ, as a descendant of Abraham, is the greater son who inherits all the blessings promised to Abraham (Rom 4:11-25; Gal 3:8-9, 16). Jesus inherits the whole earth as the King of kings and Lord of lords. And through Christ, Christians are heirs to everything that rightly belongs to Jesus. As Abraham's children by faith, we encounter God through Christ who guarantees the covenant promise to us upon pain of his own death. He loved us to death so we might inherit the promise. He died so we might fully trust him. "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). How trustworthy is our God!