

GENESIS 15:7-21 (THE LORD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM)

Introduction: The Bible is full of stories about people, places, and circumstances. As we read it, we can often get so caught up in the story that we forget about what the purpose of it is and why it was placed in the Bible.

We all have a million stories about our own lives too. Although some of us are boring, just like some of the boring people in the Bible. And some of us live super duper exciting lives, just like the super duper exciting people mentioned in the Bible. The difference though is that they are in the Bible and we're not.

God has chosen these people and real events in their lives, boring or exciting, to help us understand what He is doing and why. Eventually, we'll get to the book of Leviticus and we'll be going through page after page of what seems repetitious, complicated, outdated, and to many people, downright uninteresting.

I've noticed time and again people start reading the Bible from Genesis, all excited about the challenge. The reading is easy and things go quickly. But after a few weeks, I stop hearing from them. I know they've gotten through some of Exodus and have quit.

The reason is that they don't understand the need for all of the things that are placed there and they fall back on, "Well, I know Jesus loves me... that's good enough for me." In one respect, that's true. But in another, it's the farthest thing from reality for the believer. Understanding what the Bible is trying to tell us is like understanding your computer better.

As long as you have the basics and the computer is working fine – "Well, I have the internet... that's good enough for me." Most people are content with that – "I have Facebook, a site with the weather radar, some news sites... I'm good." But when things stop working, then trouble begins.

And just like that, when things in your life stop going well, suddenly "Jesus loves me" doesn't seem enough. It didn't stop being true, but now you

need to evaluate the process a lot more to understand why bad things are happening to the one Jesus loves.

There are a couple ways to do this. One is to ask your pastor, if you have one. He can brush you up on the whole, “It’ll work out ok” thing. Or, you can post your troubles on Facebook and hope people will keep saying nice things to make the problems fade away. Maybe you can post on a prayer group and the problems will disappear because people are praying for you.

Once again though – the pastor could be wrong. Most pastors disagree on even minor points of doctrine. How much more in the important issues that affect your “Jesus loves me” thinking? The people on Facebook are eventually going to get tired of saying nice things to you all day.

If you’re a constant bummer... well, no one wants to be around a constant bummer. And prayer groups are fine, but believe me – most people who promise to pray for you probably don’t and those who do may not even be saved.

I have news for you, if someone isn’t saved, they can pray all day and all night for you and the prayers are wasted breath. The Bible tells us that the prayers of the unrighteous are an abomination to God. If you think I’m kidding –

One who turns away his ear from hearing the law,
Even his prayer *is* an abomination. Proverbs 28:9

So what are you to do when your computer stops working? You figure out the problem, fix it, and get back to your computing. And when your life is having troubles, if you’re smart, you’ll say “I know where the answer is” and you’ll pull out your Bible, which you are already familiar with because you read it every day, and you refresh your memory about how to handle the problem.

Text Verse: Those who fear You will be glad when they see me,
Because I have hoped in Your word.

⁷⁵ I know, O LORD, that Your judgments *are* right,
And *that* in faithfulness You have afflicted me. Psalm 119:74, 75

Yes, we may have afflictions as faithful Christians, but those afflictions are because God is building us up in character and reliance on Him. And so... May God speak to us through His word today and may His glorious name ever be praised.

I. How Shall I know, Lord

Today we're going to look at a most unusual ritual recorded in the Bible. It's called "cutting a covenant" and its significance is not to be taken lightly. Before we get into our first verse of the day, let's read the first 6 verses of chapter 15 that we went over last week –

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!"
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.

In these verses we discovered once again, the very Source of righteousness for the people of the world – the imputed righteousness of God which comes by faith in His promises and in what He has and will accomplish for His people.

When we get to those "tough to understand why they're there verses" in the Bible, we will be able to look back at Chapter 15 of Genesis and understand better that whatever these things mean, the problem has already been resolved for Abraham and so it must be resolvable for us too. And it will be.

All we need to do is finish up by reading the New Testament and then we'll see the larger picture,,, which leads us right back to Chapter 15 of Genesis. We are righteous by faith. But we will understand it more clearly because we will see that it is faith in Jesus and what He did. Genesis 15 is just looking forward to that.

Hold on to this knowledge I'm giving you right now, because the law and all of its tedious sacrifices and demands does serve a purpose. God doesn't waste breath or words. Every thing He says is for the purpose of revealing the greatness of Himself and the marvelous workings of Jesus Christ our Lord.

We will see that righteousness before God cannot come from us because we're already fallen and we are already separated from Him. We've learned this in Genesis chapter 3 and will continue to learn it until the last pages of the Bible. Only by an imputation of righteousness can we hope to be reconciled to God.

This "justification by faith alone" must be emphasized because if we somehow believe that what we do plays a part in our righteousness, we deny the perfect justice of the Lord and destroy the only basis by which we came come before Him clean and forgiven.

If God were to declare us just and righteous based on our deeds, then Jesus was lying when He said in Matthew 5:48 "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." Our deeds are already tainted with imperfection. So how can we be perfect, just as our Father in heaven is perfect? By faith alone.

I'll explain this later, but remember that God declared Abram righteous simply by believing God. Therefore, it is faith in what God has promised and what God has done that made him righteous.

⁷ Then He said to him, “I *am* the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.”

In verse 5 we read, “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.” And then in verse 6 it says, “And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.”

Nothing else is recorded here specifically because nothing else happened. God made a promise and Abram had faith in that promise – “Righteous...You are now righteous.” After crediting Abram with righteousness based on his faith alone the Lord now reminds him of who He is – “I am the LORD.”

“I am the self-existent Creator who spoke the universe into being. I heat the day with the sun and I call the stars into brightness at night. I am the LORD - Jehovah, the God of Power and Perfection.”

“I am also the one who saved you out of the greedy flame of hell when I called you from Ur of the Chaldeans. And not only did I call you, but I brought you – I carried you on eagle’s wings from the place of fire and destruction to this land...the land of your inheritance. I have brought you this far and I will be with you and guide you always.”

The Lord glories in what he has accomplished as both an act of power and of grace. Yes, Abram got on his donkey with his family and headed out, but it is the Lord who both told him to do so and who ensured he’d make it safely to the Promised Land.

And when He speaks about the land, He doesn’t just say that He would give it to him, but that He would give it to him as an inheritance. This is the surest title to the action and we see that the providential hand of God has secret and yet gracious intents in all that He does.

Abram is a picture of us and the Lord is repeating what He has done to show us what He will do. We as humans stand in flames, represented by Ur

where Abram was called from, and we are called out and brought out of those flames by the same God.

We can't conceive of the great workings of God until the events have come to pass and only then do we see what He was driving at. How many of you here have called on Christ. Before it came, did you see it coming? In my case I never could have imagined what God would do until it was done.

And every moment of history unfolds in the same way. It's all leading to an end which will be far more wonderful than even the promise to Abram. In what is only a picture of what's ahead, God uses Abram to show **us** of even greater glory to come.

⁸ And he said, "Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?"

The Lord just got done telling Abram of everything He's done for Him so far and what He will do in the time ahead. And He's told it to him in a single concise and yet perfectly full explanation. This brings about Abram's obvious question – "Adonai God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?"

I mean, he's standing there speaking to God who has already fulfilled the first half of what He's said. Of course he should wonder about the rest. "Jesus, you said that you would forgive me if I called on you. And sure enough, you forgave me.

You've also promised that You would never leave me nor forsake me... How can I know this is true?"

It's the constant battle of believing God in what has been done while at the same time wondering if He's capable of following through on the rest. In Abram's case though, this shouldn't be seen as a question of doubt. Instead, he's looking for a confirmation of his faith which has already been expressed in the promise.

At other times in the Bible, people have asked God for a sign. In Judges 6, Gideon asked the Lord for one. Let's read it –

³⁶ So Gideon said to God, “If You will save Israel by my hand as You have said— ³⁷ look, I shall put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece only, and *it is* dry on all the ground, then I shall know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You have said.” ³⁸ And it was so. When he rose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece together, he wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowlful of water. ³⁹ Then Gideon said to God, “Do not be angry with me, but let me speak just once more: Let me test, I pray, just once more with the fleece; let it now be dry only on the fleece, but on all the ground let there be dew.” ⁴⁰ And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground.

King Hezekiah of Israel was given a promise from the Lord and he also asked for a sign. And in Isaiah 7, the Lord spoke a promise to King Ahaz and then offered a sign to confirm His word.

Asking God for a sign isn’t sinful, but demanding one is. And there is a difference. God has stated that we are sealed with the Holy Spirit the moment we believe in Christ. This is how God has spoken this truth to us –

In Him you also *trusted*, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.

Ephesians 1:13, 14

We have every assurance this is true because God spoke it in His word. We can ask God for a sign if we wish. If He provides it, that is His prerogative, and if not, so be it. However, there are churches and seminaries which demand a sign such as speaking in tongues.

If you don’t speak in tongues, then according to them you haven’t been baptized into the Holy Spirit, which is both contradictory to the Bible and is a demand upon God. This is both presumptuous and sinful.

Abram has asked for a sign and the Lord agreed to give him one –

⁹ So He said to him, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”

In response to a request for a sign, the Lord tells Abram to bring five animals to Him. The heifer, goat, and ram are all three years old, meaning that they are fully grown and in the prime of life.

Abram might have expected a sign from heaven, like speaking in tongues, but God gives him a sign by requesting that he bring what he already had in his possession.

A good lesson here is that if you want to speak in tongues, go to language school and learn your Hebrew, Greek, Japanese, Korean, Russian, or whatever and then offer it to the Lord.

If you want the assurance of God’s favor then attend to the things which will result in that favor. Only then can you expect to meet with God in and through them.

¹⁰ Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.

The Bible doesn’t say that God told Abram to do this. Instead, he just did it. This means that he already understood what was coming and how to get ready for it. The sign of God’s promise is the confirmation of the covenant and it is accomplished in a manner he was already familiar with.

Instead of the innocence of youth found in later animal sacrifices during the temple times in Israel, these animals are fully grown and this indicates the mature and accountable decision of the coming sign. This sign will be binding to the point of death as is evidenced by the animals which Abram slaughters.

¹¹ And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

Abram is standing there waiting for the confirmation of the covenant and, as happens with dead animals, birds of prey came down on them. In order to maintain their purity and keep them from being defiled, Abram chases them away.

Are you going to learn from this verse? As Christians, we're waiting on the final completion of our covenant – made at the high cost of the life of God's own Son. As we wait, we are called "living sacrifices" by Paul. Here's how he puts it –

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. Romans 12:1

The problem though is that as we wait on the Lord, the unclean birds of the world – our own impure thoughts and actions – fight against the holy sacrifice.

They come down and try to pollute our lives with wrong living and a morally impure lifestyle. But God has shown us that we need to chase these unclean birds away and wait quietly upon the Lord in holiness and purity.

II. Know With Certainty

How shall I know, Lord? Know with certainty...

¹² Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror *and* great darkness fell upon him.

This is an almost spooky verse to read and think about. The sun is going down, a deep sleep falls on Abram, and at the same time there is horror and great darkness in his mind. The word for "deep sleep" is found only 7 times in the Bible and the last time we saw it is when God put Adam to sleep in order to take out one of his ribs and make a wife for him.

The deep sleep, the setting of the sun, and the horror and darkness are being used to show the supernatural nature of the darkness and sleep and to set up a distinction between this vision and a regular dream. The reason for the horror and darkness is given next.

¹³ Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land *that is not theirs*, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years.

Earlier Abram asked, “How shall I know?” And in response to his question, the Lord said to him, “Know certainly.” When you have questions of the Lord, as we all do, it’s only right to ask Him, “How shall I know?” And His response to you is the same as it is to Abram here – “Know certainly.”

After saying this, He speaks His word to Abram and expects Abram to believe it. And He has also spoken His word to you and He expects you to believe it. How can you know? Read your Bible. It is God’s word spoken to you as surely as he spoke to Abram.

The horror and darkness that Abram experienced are given to show him what it will be like for his descendants during a time of affliction. It’s an important verse to remember because many people who study their Bible have misinterpreted this verse and one other in Exodus to mean that the Israelites would be in Egypt for 430 years. However, this isn’t the case at all.

This 400 year period is speaking of Abram’s descendants, from the birth of Isaac to the time of the Exodus. Israel was actually only in Egypt for 215 years, not 400. If you want to save yourself the hard work, I’ve already done it and have it on my website on a page called “Dwelling in Egypt.”

¹⁴ And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions.

This is specifically speaking about the time in Egypt and the judgment they would receive, but it is not all inclusive of the previous verse. Rather the people of Israel were strangers in both Canaan and Egypt during the 400 period.

After their time in Egypt, as we'll see in the future, the Israelites will plunder the Egyptians and will come out with a great amount of wealth. Much of this wealth will be used by the people to build the tabernacle where God would meet with them, but some would be used to build a golden calf in place of God.

Having great possessions often leads to great mistakes. Only when we use our wealth properly is it of any true benefit to ourselves. God's gifts may be a blessing, but we can use them in ways which bring a curse.

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

Abram has been given the promise of a long life and a peaceful death. We'll see that in the end, he will live to be 175 years old and he will go to his grave in peace. Unfortunately for us, we have to wait to see how our end will come about.

Because of this, it's right that we live each day as best we can and spend our time focusing on living for the Lord. Any moment could be our last and so every moment should be lived that way.

Implied in the words that he would "go to his fathers in peace" is that they still exist – in other words, the immortality of the soul. If this sounds like this is a stretch, consider two things.

First, God said it in a comforting manner. In other words, death without continued existence has no comfort for us and therefore continued existence is implied.

Secondly, Jesus said this to the people of Israel –

But even Moses showed in the *burning bush passage* that the dead are raised, when he called the Lord 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' ³⁸ For He is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live to Him." Luke 20:37, 38

Because God is eternal, all are alive to Him. He speaks of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the present tense. If the dead are raised and they are always alive to God, then they are always alive.

¹⁶ But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

There are several times in the Bible that we see the concept of sin heaping up in a land. As sins are committed, they reach a point where there is no longer a remedy for the people of the land and at that time they are destroyed. We see this here.

We also see it in the conduct, destruction, and exile of Israel twice in history, and we see it in the rise and fall of nations. It is a truth that simply can't be ignored. In Numbers 35 it's said as explicitly as could be possible –

So you shall not pollute the land where you *are*; for blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it.

As I've said so many times in the past, the crime of abortion is a crime of blood. There is no atonement for the land which sheds innocent blood except by the blood of those who shed it.

At the same time, in this verse is also an understanding of the mercy of God. If one sin of Adam was enough to condemn the entire human race, then we can see the immense mercy of God in allowing 400 years for the Amorites to live, enjoy life, and hopefully search for God and find Him.

Instead of destruction and immediately granting the promise to Abram, he allows His own chosen people to suffer trials while the inhabitants of Canaan are given the benefits of enjoying His land. Anyone who can't find God's wisdom, graciousness, and mercy in this verse has both a warped and a deviant sense of who God is.

In this one verse is found the foreknowledge of God, His sovereignty in administering the affairs of nations, His mercy in sparing morally corrupt

people until there is no remedy for them, and His justice in exercising judgment,

Finally there is something that we will only see later in the Bible – that the Amorite is the chief nation among those in the land who will receive first and full judgment for their deviant living.

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.

When the people of the Mideast joined in a pact, they'd follow the same rites as we see here – slaughter an animal, cut it in two and pass through the pieces. In order to validate His word in a way which Abram would understand, He followed this ancient practice.

However, Abram didn't pass through the pieces, only the Lord did. This means the promise is one-sided and unconditional. Abram isn't bound to anything, but the Lord binds Himself to the promise.

The significance of the animals being cut in two is that it signifies the penalty for failing to keep the covenant. This is the purpose of cutting a covenant... it is a binding action with the severest consequences for failing to live up to it.

The smoking oven and the burning torch represent the protection of the promise by God. The smoke represents the destruction of those who would afflict the people to whom the promise is made and the burning torch is the consuming fire which would bring about the destruction.

At the same time as being an instrument of destruction for the enemies of the promise, they are an instrument of protection and light for the people of the promise.

At the exodus, a similar manifestation of God will be seen which will lead the people out of bondage. And this manifestation will, at the same, bring destruction on Israel's enemies.

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.”

Ten groups of people are listed here. The land they possess now will be given to Abram’s descendants. The covenant is made, it is unconditional, and it is absolutely binding. What God has spoken will come to pass. The land is for Abram and his descendants.

Just so you know, God has also entered into a covenant with us. It is through the glory of His only begotten Son, Jesus. It is He, like the smoking oven and torch which passed through the animals, who passes between God and us.

Like Abram, we also have a sign – it is a deposit, it is a guarantee of the good things promised for all believers. It is the sealing of the Holy Spirit. If you’ve never accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior, let me explain how you can...

To Your Descendants I Give This Land

The Lord said to Abram, yes He did say
I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur
From the land of the Chaldeans where once you did stay
And this land I give you to inherit...that’s for sure
And Abram being an especially inquisitive sort of man
Asked, “Lord God how shall I know that I will receive this from Your Hand?”
So the Lord said to Abram, yes, this He did say
“Bring me a heifer, a goat, and a ram each three years old
Also a turtledove and a young pigeon bring this way”
And Abram brought them all just as he was told

He cut them in two down the middle, piece opposite piece
But the birds he did not cut in two
As vultures came down on the carcasses Abram made them cease
He drove them away, yes, this thing he did do
Now as the sun was going down, he fell into a dark sleep
And the horror and darkness that came upon him was so deep
And the Lord said to Abram, "Know for sure what I say
Your descendants will be strangers in a land not their own
And they will serve them four hundred years from that day
But I will judge the nation they serve, my greatness will be shown"
They will come out with very many possessions
From the people who gave them so many oppressions

Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace
You will be buried when at a good old age your life will cease
In the fourth generation your people shall return here
For the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete
And it came to pass as the night was drawing near
Abram saw something that probably raised him from his seat
Behold, a smoking oven and burning torch did appear
That passed between those pieces he had laid out
On the same day, the Lord made a covenant sincere
This promise left Abram without a single doubt

To your descendants I have given this land
Yes, it is a present from my gracious hand
And to this day He has been faithful to Abram's seed
They dwell in the Promised Land, yes even now
It is God's land to parcel out, so the nations should take heed
God promised it to them, He promised it with a vow
God keeps every promise, faithful is He
So don't worry about what will come, it will be ok
God sent His own Son just for you and for me
And He will finish his work in us, some glorious day

Hallelujah and Amen...