

They Speak Of Me

*²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets,
he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.
(Luke 24:27. ESV)*

*³⁹ You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life;
and these are they which testify of Me.
(John 5:39. NKJV)*

The Lord Made A Covenant

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Genesis 15:1-21

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to Genesis 15:1-21. Once again, this is a massively significant text for our understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Our chapter this morning, chapter 15, is a big rock among big rocks. It is absolutely huge. So big is this chapter and so laden with Gospel snowballs, that we are actually going to take 3 weeks to unpack it. This morning we will take a similar approach to the last two weeks, learning first something new about the walk of faith through the life of Abraham and then we'll pick up the primary Gospel snowball and talk about it in terms of what it says to us about being in covenant relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Let me begin by reading to you from Genesis 15:1-21; hear now the Word of the Lord:

Genesis 15:1-21 (ESV)

¹ After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."

² But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"

³ And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir."

⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir."

⁵ And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

⁶ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

⁷ And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess."

⁸ But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"

⁹ He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”

¹⁰ And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half.

¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him.

¹³ Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years.

¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.

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

¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,

²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,

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

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

In this story we learn through Abraham that:

In The Life Of Faith:

1. God frequently tests our faith by deferring our inheritance

That’s the crisis that sets up this story isn’t it? Abraham has made his choice back in chapter 14; that’s why our story begins with the words: “After these things”. This covenant episode happened AFTER Abraham rejected the offer of Sodom and threw in his lot with God. Abraham made the decision to seek blessing from God alone and YET no blessings have thus far been delivered. Hope deferred makes the heart sick and so it is with Abraham. God has made great promises about children and heirs and nations coming from Abraham but year after year Abraham gets older, Sarah gets older and not one baby is born. “O God, what will you give me, for I continue childless?” You can hear Abraham’s despair in that prayer, you can hear the sickness of his heart. God speaks to that sickness and that hurt and he says:

Genesis 15:4-5 (ESV)

“This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.”

⁵ And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

You're going to have a son Abraham, and he's going to have sons and their going to have sons and you are going to have more grandchildren than you can shake a stick at. You'll be glad you're dead Abraham because Christmas time would be very expensive, you know what I'm saying?! You're going to have BABIES Abraham, just you wait and see. And then we have these very important words:

Genesis 15:6 (ESV)

⁶ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Abraham BELIEVED the Lord and God credited it to him as righteousness – if you are a Bible reader you know that verse is important. The Apostle Paul quotes it twice in his letters and the Apostle James quotes it. That's the Gospel right there friends, so we need to make sure we understand those words. Let me quote the Old Testament scholar K.A. Matthews:

The syntax of the verb *wehe'emin* diverts from the typical pattern found in past tense narrative. The force of the construction conveys an ongoing faith repeated from the past.¹

I realize that's a bit technical but grammar is the handmaiden of theology, meaning that we have to take our ideas about God from the words of the text that God has given. The words matter. What Matthews is saying is that this wasn't the birth of Abraham's faith, it was the testing and authenticating of Abraham's faith. Faith isn't faith until it is tested and you need to know friend, that God often tests and authenticates faith by deferring our blessings and inheritance.

Let me say two quick things about that. First of all, this is what separates God from a Pepsi machine. God does not want to have the same relationship with you that you have with a Pepsi machine. You're relationship with a Pepsi machine is pretty straight forward. You look at the offerings on the front of the machine, you pick what you want, you press the button, and the desired flavour of Pepsi pops out at the bottom. That is the relationship many people want with God. Pray – press the button, receive the blessing. What version of Christianity does that sound like? The Prosperity Gospel, you could just as easily call it the Pepsi Gospel. Press the button, receive the blessing! Call into being things that are not! Name it and claim it! God doesn't want that kind of relationship so to test your faith, to test your love, he introduces delay. He promises blessing but then he waits and he watches you wait. Sometimes you will have to wait until

¹ Kenneth A. Matthews, Genesis 11:27-50:26, New American Commentary 1B (Nashville: B&H, 2005), 166-167 as cited in Kingdom Through Covenant, 250.

AFTER YOU DIE to claim your blessing. That seems long to you, but not to God. Many of you will be tested by the deferral – even to death – of your physical healing. You need to know that. It will come – you need to know that – but it may be deferred. One day he WILL wipe away every tear. That day is coming and it may today, but it may be deferred until THAT day. We serve a God who tests faith by deferring blessing. Know that because ignorance of that may destroy your soul and steal your joy.

That's an important faith lesson, so file that away in your notes and hopefully by the end of our treatment of Abraham you'll have a pretty full and useful description of what it looks like to walk with God in faith. Let's turn our attention now to the primary Gospel snowball in this passage. There are at least two other significant Gospel snowballs in this text so if you care about something that we don't talk about today, just come back next week and the week after that; we'll get there. Right now I want to draw your attention to the covenant cutting in verses 7-21. Pretty much everybody agrees that the covenant with Abraham is the most important covenant in the Old Testament for our understanding of the New Covenant – the covenant that we enjoy and that brings us into saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. As we mentioned last week, the Law Covenant with Moses was only temporary, much of it anticipated Christ and therefore passed away when Christ came, and much of it was only intended to restrain sin until the gifts of regeneration and Spirit indwelling were given to God's people. The Mosaic Covenant therefore is nowhere near as useful as the Abrahamic in terms of helping us understand the nature of our relationship with God through Christ. This covenant in chapter 15 is a major Gospel lens and we turn our attention to it now.

Understanding Our Covenant Relationship With God

We do have to be careful here, however, because the relationship between these covenants is not 1 to 1 equivalence. We know that of course because one is called "Old" and one is called "New". If we are going to call ourselves "New Covenant Believers" obviously that implies two things, 1. Continuity and 2. Discontinuity. I trust that is brutally obvious. We wouldn't use the word "new" if our covenant with God was EXACTLY like Abraham's – we would just say that we are "Covenant believers". So we anticipate "newness" and "moreness" in the New Covenant. But we also anticipate correlation and continuity, otherwise we wouldn't bother to use the word "covenant" at all, we wouldn't bother, as Paul bothered and James bothered, to explain our

relationship with God through the lens of Abraham's relationship with God. So we expect sameness and newness, continuity and discontinuity. Let's use that as a bit of a grid for understanding this passage. Let's talk first about what is the same.

What Is The Same?

First of all we want to notice that the foundation of our relationship with God in covenant is exactly the same.

1. The Foundation = (Grace + Faith) Alone

No one has ever come into right relationship with God except that they come by grace alone through faith alone. We saw the faith aspect in verse 6 and we're going to do a whole message on that next week because this whole narrative provides a wonderful definition of saving faith, so we'll skip right to unpacking the "grace alone" side of this common foundation. Look at verse 7. Abraham asks God how he can be sure – he is believing, but he asks how he can be sure that God will be to him as he said he would be. What does that sound like in the New Testament? "I believe Lord, help my unbelief". **Help me have faith, God!** So what does God do? Look at verse 9. God tells Abraham to assemble sacrificial animals. All of the animals are the very animals that 400 some odd years later will become the basis of the Jewish sacrificial system. Abraham assembles sacrificial animals and cuts the heifer and the sheep and the goats and he creates a bloody passage between the severed carcasses. This by the way, is God speaking to Abraham in the language of his culture. In Abraham's culture when a covenant was cut this is what you did. Suppose the Pharaoh of Egypt made a covenant with a local chieftain – one of those "mayors with an attitude". Pharaoh would promise protection and security to the chief and the chief in return promise 100 trained warriors for any of Pharaoh's battles and 100 bushels of wheat each harvest for the supply of Pharaoh's table. That was pretty standard stuff in Abraham's day. Then to seal the deal, Pharaoh would have some animals slaughtered and spread, just like here and the chief would walk down the bloody aisle as a way of saying: "I understand full well that so will it be done to me if I violate the terms of this benevolent contract". Scholars call it a "self-maledictory oath" – you can use that phrase to impress your friends later today. So shall it be done to me. Abraham knew about this, he had probably seen it done dozens of times, he may even have passed through the pieces himself back in Haran – this

was common language. But here is where something goes awry. Something happens that Abraham did not expect. Look at verse 17:

Genesis 15:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, **behold**, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

When you see the word “behold” in the middle of a sentence that means “pay attention! Something huge is happening!” Are you seeing the huge? The smoking fire pot and the flaming torch are symbols for the presence of God! God himself passes through the pieces! God assumes the responsibility for the obedience of the lesser party. God cuts a covenant with Abraham but he says to Abraham – I’ll be responsible for my side AND your side. I will do it – I will do what you need to do so that you can be in relationship with me. Are you seeing that? That is the Gospel! That is GRACE! That is marvellous, infinite, matchless GRACE! That is favour and gift beyond measure. I will do what you can’t do and I will pay for what you will do – I will bear the curse of my own covenant. In that moment God announced both the incarnation and the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ upon the cross. That is the Gospel RIGHT THERE in Genesis 15, and Jesus said, Abraham took that on faith and he looked forward to its fulfilment. Jesus said that in John 8:56:

John 8:56 (ESV)

⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.”

We’re not told how much Abraham understood about what was happening and what was being promised here but Jesus said – and I would imagine that he would know – that Abraham looked forward to this promise being fulfilled and he saw it in faith and was glad. He rested in the marvellous grace of God.

Listen to me friends, this passage is telling you something absolutely critical about the Gospel. It is telling us that because of the fall, human beings on their own can never find rest with a holy God. That’s why this little story begins with dreadful and great darkness – a holy God was drawing near and Abraham was not prepared. If God thought that Abraham could have kept the covenant then he would have had Abraham walk through the pieces, but God knows us, he knows our frame and so he did for us what we could never do for ourselves. And he promised to pay in his own blood for what we did do that we ought not to have done. This is grace. Salvation

comes from the action of God, not the action of man. If you don't get that, you don't get the Gospel. Gentry says:

The fact that only God passes between the pieces is quite remarkable and shows that the promise depends upon him and him alone.²

Grace and grace alone. No one has ever entered into relationship with God by any other means. The foundation of every covenant in the Bible is grace alone accessed by faith alone. Abraham believed God, Abraham saw what was promised and was glad. The foundation of our relationship with God, Old Covenant and New is grace alone through faith alone, and even in this story we can see that this is always and ultimately because of Christ alone. The obedience and sacrifice of Jesus are promised here in the Old Testament and realized later in the New. Regardless of which way faith is pointed, forward or back, it points to Christ or it is not faith. That part never changes; that part stays the same.

Secondly, in terms of what is the same:

2. The Plan And The Purpose: Holiness And Mission

Flip forward to Genesis 17. Genesis 17 is not another covenant with Abraham, rather it is God providing further content and clarity. Look at verses 1-2:

Genesis 17:1-2 (ESV)

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; **walk before me, and be blameless,**

² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly."

That phrase "walk before me and be blameless" needs to be understood. Gentry writes:

When God walks before someone, this expression means to give guidance and protection. Conversely, when people walk before God, it means that they serve as his emissary or diplomatic representative.... Thus, Abram is to be God's agent or diplomatic messenger and representative in the world. When the world looks at Abram they will see what it is like to have a right relationship to God and to be what God intended for humanity.³

² Peter Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, Kingdom Through Covenant (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 2012), 251.

³ *Ibid.*, 260.

Abraham was saved by grace alone, though faith alone, because of Christ alone FOR A REASON and TOWARD A PURPOSE and that purpose was holiness and mission. What does that sound like to you? Well it sounds like the reason and purpose FOR WHICH WE WERE SAVED! The Apostle Paul says to the Ephesians:

Ephesians 1:3-4 (ESV)

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,

⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

Just like Abraham, God elected us before we had done anything good or bad, he saved us by grace alone, through faith alone because of Christ alone, he has given us promises of blessing that wait for us in the future and he has done all of this FOR A REASON and UNTO A PURPOSE.

that we should be holy and blameless BEFORE HIM. (verse 4)

Where have you seen that before? It is a word for word quote from Genesis 17:1. Paul says: “We are saved in the same way and for the same purpose as was Abraham. So that we could be holy and blameless BEFORE HIM. So that we could be his emissaries, so that we could SHOW FORTH what it means to be in right relationship with God before all the world. Be holy as I am holy and call all the world out of darkness and into his marvelous light.

Do you understand what that means? It means holiness IS MISSION! It is more than mission but it is not less than mission and it can never be separated from mission. Mission is a display of God’s saving and changing grace before all the watching world, Paul went on to say that very thing to the Ephesians. Paul says that he was sent to preach the Gospel:

Ephesians 3:9-10 (ESV)

⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things,

¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

The church is supposed to make a SHOW of being DIFFERENT and being FREE and being CHANGED. She is to manifest and make known the power and the glory of our salvation in Jesus Christ. That’s why our approach to human sexuality can never be separated from our call to do mission. Sexuality IS MISSION! We’re being told now by so called “missional” experts to stay silent on sexuality for the sake of the mission, but my friends, how we do sexuality is part of

our mission in this culture as never before. We must make a show before the world of the power of the Gospel to live free from the bondage of lusts and to walk willingly in all the ways of God. Holiness and mission go together. That's what we were called to. That's God's plan for releasing blessing and calling the nations and that hasn't changed. We are a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, Old Testament and New.

What Is Better?

So what has changed? In the few minutes we have left I want to show you what is new and what is better in the New Covenant. The foundation is the same, the purpose is the same, but the HELP is marvellously improved.

1. The Help: New Hearts And The Indwelling Holy Spirit

We don't find this in Genesis 15, that's why we call it the New Covenant. The help given to Abraham and his descendants did not include this. They were given two things that we continue to benefit from; a sign and a law. The sign was circumcision. That comes in Genesis 17. Please notice that it comes AFTER the grace, AFTER the faith and AFTER the faith is tested and validated. The sign of faith FOLLOWED, CONFIRMED and STRENGTHENED the faith itself. That's a good order and that's why in this church we practice believers' baptism. The sign, logically, should follow the thing signified. Signs strengthen. Signs remind. Signs teach. Signs are helpful. Abraham's descendants were also given the law. We talked about that last week. The law was given to teach and to restrain. The law taught the character of God, the law taught them what to look for in the coming Christ and the law restrained sin. That is very helpful. But, it wasn't enough. Sin was stronger than the help of the sign and the law. The people were not a holy nation and they were never functionally, "a kingdom of priests" to the world. Something more was needed and something more was promised.

In Jeremiah 31 we hear the words "New Covenant" for the very first time:

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (ESV)

³¹ "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make **a new covenant** with the house of Israel and the house of Judah,

³² **not like the covenant that I made with their fathers** on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt...

³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: **I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts**. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people... For **I will forgive their iniquity**, and I will remember their sin no more.”

A new covenant is coming, explicitly not like the Sinai covenant but in line with and fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant, “I will forgive their iniquity”. A new covenant is coming with new and better helps! External motivations will give way to internal motivations! We will WANT to obey God, we will HATE SIN and LOVE RIGHTEOUSNESS and this will make all the difference in the world.

Jesus gathers both of these promises to himself and to his own ministry. He says in Luke 22:20 when he shared the Last Supper with his disciples:

Luke 22:20 (ESV)

“This cup that is poured out for you is **the new covenant** in my blood.

I go to purchase for you this new and better deal. I go to the cross so that my blood can be sprinkled on your hearts. I go to the tomb and to death and up again to my Father’s side so that I can send upon you the promised Holy Spirit. It will be better. He promised that too.

John 16:7 (ESV)

⁷ Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: **it is to your advantage** that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.

When the Holy Spirit comes and fills your hearts and helps you to hate sin and love righteousness IT WILL BE BETTER. He promised that and he was right. It is better. It is better to love God and to HATE SIN and to hunger and thirst after righteousness than to fear punishment and censure from men. It is totally different and it is better.

So much is the same – we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone because of Christ alone. We are saved for holiness and mission. So much is the same! But this is better. Hearts made willing and hearts made home to the promised Holy Spirit. This is what we’ve been waiting for. This is the Gospel and this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.