

CHRIST THE COVENANTER
3. CHRIST IN THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM
GENESIS 15

INTRODUCTION

Due to the depravity of the human heart, the “universal” revelations of the *Covenant of Grace* in the covenants with Adam (Gen.3:15) and Noah (Gen.9) were not sufficient to preserve the knowledge of the *Covenant of Grace* in the world. Despite numerous sights of disgraced, detested and defeated snakes and also of rainbows of peace, very few had the faith to lay hold on the spiritual promises these external covenant signs signified. They took the physical and non-redemptive benefits but most showed no interest in the spiritual and redemptive benefits they signified. Humanity was lost and dying in unbelief.

In order to preserve a visible seed to serve Him, God, therefore, graciously narrowed down His dealings to one family, Abram and his descendents. Again, as in the case of the *Covenant with Noah*, we notice that the covenant is with a representative man. Special revelations were made to Abram as God entered into covenant with him and his seed. This temporary narrowing of covenant promises to Abram and his family would ultimately better secure the promises of the *Covenant of Grace* in the long-term. So, though the Redeemer was to descend from this one family, the salvation He would accomplish would eventually mean blessings for “all the families of the earth”.

God’s covenant promises to Abram were gradually revealed and unfolded in chapters 11 to 17. Interwoven with these chapters are Abram’s responses to the promises. It is a story of faith and failure; faith to leave Ur, but failure at Canaan: faith to enter Canaan but failure in Egypt; faith regarding Lot, but failure regarding Hagar; concluding with faith at circumcision. Faith and failure, faith and failure but God remains faithful and unailing.

In this study we will focus most of our attention on chapter 15, as it serves as a useful summary of the *Covenant with Abraham*. The following outline sets chapter 15 in its immediate scriptural context.

Chapter 15	Terms of the Covenant	Covenant Faith
Chapter 16	Test of the Covenant	Covenant Failure
Chapter 17	Token of the Covenant	Covenant Fidelity

We shall first of all examine Abram’s crisis of faith. Then we shall study God’s provision of a covenant for Abram, and Abram’s confidence in these Divine promises. Finally, we shall note that, after further clarification, God concludes this covenant arrangement with two “cuttings”.

I. CRISIS (v1-4)

In chapter 14 Abram defeated the Eastern Kings, but he now fears retaliation. He was offered a great reward for his victory by the King of Sodom, but rejected this and now faces the future empty-handed. His fear and his self-denial were noticed by God who drew near to assure him that He Himself would be His shield and sufficiency, His greatest safety and greatest reward. God’s “I AM” is perfectly adequate for man’s “I am not”.

God said, “I am thy shield...” This Hebrew noun, here translated “shield”, refers to an object which provides covering and protection to the body during warfare. It may also mean “suzerain”. We shall look at this word more closely when we study the *Covenant*

with Moses. However, it will suffice for the moment to note that “suzerain” means “covenant maker” and “covenant overlord”. This fits the covenant context well.

However, for Abram, no amount of protection or provision could console him as long as he and his wife remained childless and the Canaanites filled the land. 10 years had passed since God promised him a son and possession of the land (ch.12-13).

Abram, though, was not primarily concerned about having a child and possessing land. Just as in God’s promises to Adam and Noah, the physical and temporal promises had a spiritual and eternal meaning for those who had the faith to see it. The promises of physical blessing and benefit were windows for believers to look through and see the spiritual blessings and benefits of the *Covenant of Grace*. So, Abram was not focused so much on God’s plan for himself (a son and a land), but rather God’s plan of salvation by which God’s eternal Son would secure an eternal land (new heaven’s and earth) for Abram and his spiritual seed. These two plans, though, were not separate entities, for God had organised the accomplishment of His plan of salvation through His plan of seed and land for Abram and his descendents. God had a glorious plan, and God made a gracious promise. But, God seemed to be doing nothing! Professor Richard Pratt commented on this passage:

Abram’s desire to multiply and have dominion went far beyond his individual life. Abram knew that his seed was critical to the history of the world because God had chosen him to be the spiritual father of all the people who would receive salvation (Gen.12:3). As the apostle Paul argued, Christ was the seed of Abram in whom all nations would receive a blessing (Gal.3:16). Abram desired a line of descendants climaxing in the Christ. The land that Abram hoped to possess had significance beyond his life, as well. Canaan was a symbolic foretaste of the glorious new heavens and new earth (Heb.11:8-16).¹

II. COVENANT (v5, 7)

God’s answer to Abram’s crisis was a covenant in which He formalized his promises to Abram.

1. A Special Child (15:1-6)

God gave Abram an express promise that it would not be a servant but a real son who would be his heir (v4). Further, he was promised a seed as innumerable and illustrious as the stars. The display of divine strength in the constellations gave Abram confidence that God had the power to give him a child. Whether Abram looked *down* at the dust (Gen.13:14) or *up* at the stars (15:5), he would recall God’s promise and have confidence.

This promise was fulfilled physically in Isaac and the great nation of Israel. It was fulfilled spiritually in Christ and His spiritual descendents (Gal.3:16). It’s complete, total and ultimate fulfilment will be at the close of history when all will see Christ and His seed as a multitude greater than any man can number (Rev.7:9).

2. A Special Country (15:7-21)

God also reaffirmed the earlier promise of the land (15:18). This promise was physically fulfilled in the conquest of Canaan and the establishment of the Davidic Kingdom over the land of Israel. It was spiritually fulfilled in Christ’s first coming which established and expanded his spiritual kingdom in the Middle East and throughout the world. It’s complete, total and ultimate fulfilment will be in the last act of history when Christ and His people will

¹ R Pratt, *Designed for Dignity* (New Jersey: P&R).

reign over the new heavens and the new earth. The typical nature of these promises is explained by Matthew Henry:

Either an estate without an heir, or an heir without an estate, would have been but a half comfort to Abram. But God ensures both to him; and that which made these two, the promised seed and the promised land, comforts indeed to this great believer was that they were both typical of those two invaluable blessings, Christ and heaven; and so we have reason to think, Abram eyed them.²

3. A Special Communion

As we have seen, the temporal and external blessings of the *Covenant with Abraham* (seed and land) were not an end in themselves. They were subordinate to the spiritual blessings of the *Covenant of Grace* they symbolized, typified and administered.

The natural descendents of Abram were promised the temporal and external blessings of the *Covenant with Abraham*. However only the spiritual children of Abram, those who shared his faith, enjoyed the spiritual blessings of the *Covenant of Grace* which the *Covenant with Abraham* revealed and administered. As noted before, the ultimate and climactic spiritual blessing of the *Covenant of Grace* is a spiritual and personal relationship with God. Thus we find at the heart of the *Covenant with Abraham* the promise, "I shall be your God and you shall be my people" (17:7-8). The physical descendents of Abram knew God in a special (though non-redemptive) way, that other peoples did not. However, this was again only symbolic of the spiritual relationship which Abram's spiritual children enjoyed as a fruit of the *Covenant of Grace*.

III. CONFIDENCE (v6)

Promises do no good unless we believe and act on them, and this is what Abram did.

1. Abram Believed God

Abram *believed* God, which is literally, "Abram said, 'Amen, God!'" The Hebrew word translated "believed" means "to lean your whole weight upon." Abram leaned wholly on the promise of God and the God of the promise. We are not saved by *making promises* to God but by *believing the promises* of God. The verbal form suggests that this was not the first time Abram believed, but that this trust was an ongoing activity. Literally the translation is: "Abram kept on believing, kept on being certain, kept on trusting the Trustworthy." He first believed when he obeyed God's command to leave Ur (Heb.11:8). However, Genesis 15 is the first time Abram's faith is revealed in connection with God's promise respecting his "seed", which was Christ (Gal.3:16). The New Testament presents Abram as the prototype believer; the archetype, paradigm, blueprint and example for us all to follow (Rom.4:18-21). So, the Bible highlights especially his faith concerning what God said regarding the promised Seed. Arthur Pink clarified this well:

There is no justification apart from Christ. Therefore we say it was not that Abram here 'believed God' for the first time, but that here God was pleased to openly attest his righteousness for the first time... Though Christians may believe God with respect to the common concerns of this life, such faith, while it evidences they have been justified is not the faith by which they were justified – the faith which justifies has to do directly with the person and work of our Lord

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Iowa: Word Bible Publishers),

Jesus Christ. This was the character of Abram's faith in Genesis 15; he believed the promise of God which pointed to Christ.³

In John 8:56 we read, "Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad". Abram looked forward to the "day" when in Christ all the families of the earth would be blessed. That "day" commenced at the first coming of Christ, continues in the present, and will be consummated at the last day.

2. Abram Counted Righteous

Abram believed in the Lord, and righteousness was imputed to him. The righteous are those who should be acquitted by the judges (Deut 25:1). This proves that Abram's faith was not just concerned with God's gift of a child, a country and communion. He did believe that. But that was not all he believed. He saw through these promises to the spiritual realities they signified in the *Covenant of Grace*. Abram realized that righteousness could not be obtained by "doing" the *Covenant of Works* but only by "believing" in the *Covenant of Grace*. In this covenant, Christ earns and secures a saving righteousness for all who believe in Him. In summary, on the basis of Abram's faith in the "Christ of the Covenant", Abram was reckoned as, viewed as, treated as righteous in God's sight.

IV. CLARIFICATION (v8ff)

In response to Abram's faith, God reminded him of three things to encourage him. Firstly, what God is in Himself; I am the Lord Jehovah. Secondly, what He had done for Abram; He had brought him out of Ur of the Chaldees. Thirdly, what He intended to do yet further for him; give him the land to inherit (v7).

Abram then posed a question: "And he said, Lord GOD, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?" Abram's question was not a sign of unbelief but a request for a token of assurance. God then gives him a summary of His long-term plan. This would involve Abram's seed suffering for a long time (v13), judgment on the enemies of Abram's seed (v14), the deliverance of Abram's seed out of Egypt, their happy settlement in Canaan (v16), and Abram's peaceful death and burial (v15).

The promise fulfillment was delayed for two reasons. Firstly, the disciplining of His chosen nation to make it fit for receiving the Promised Land. And, secondly, the grace of God's longsuffering towards the present occupants of the land. The iniquity of the Amorites was not yet full (v16). As a result Abram's descendants had to endure 400 years of exile from the Promised Land.

V. CUTTING (v9-12, 17-18)

Just as God gave Adam the external sign of a defeated snake, and Noah the external sign of the rainbow in order to encourage and strengthen faith in the spiritual promises they pointed towards, so God here gave two signs to encourage faith in the spiritual promises of the *Covenant of Grace*. Both signs relate to cutting. In the first, God cuts; in the second, man cuts.

1. God Cuts

God instructed Abram to fetch five animals, cut some of them in half and place the pieces opposite one another. After struggling to keep birds of prey from eating the pieces, he fell into a deep sleep and saw a smoking furnace and a burning lamp pass through the pieces (15:17). There are two alternative explanations of this incident.

³ Arthur Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis* (Albany: Ages Software, 2000), 172.

a. Picture of Israel's Future

Some argue that God followed up His summary of Israel's future with this picture of Israel's future. Gordon Wenham takes this view in his commentary on Genesis:

The action underlines the prophecy with great emphasis and is a guarantee of its fulfilment. The rite pictures Abram's descendants, in the form of sacrificial animals, protected by the Abrahamic promises from attacks by foreigners, the birds of prey. After Abram's death, his "falling asleep," the Lord (the smoking pot and torch of fire) will walk among them. The prophecy (v13-16) is more specific foretelling of 400 years' oppression in Egypt and their exodus in the fourth generation. They will then return to Canaan and expel the ten nations that inhabit it (v19-21). With this promissory oath or covenant, the scene reaches its climax, and Abram's questions are answered.⁴

b. Covenant Ratification Ceremony

The alternative and more likely explanation is that it was a ceremony to mark covenant ratification. To ratify a covenant, it was customary in that day for the contracting parties in an agreement to walk between the pieces of slain animals. This was known as "cutting the covenant" and it sealed the agreement. When the parties would walk between the pieces they were saying that, if they failed to keep their word, they deserved the same fate as the animals, i.e. to be torn in pieces.

Abram understood the responsibility to take the land and thought he would have to pass through the pieces to ratify the acceptance of his covenant obligations. It is, therefore, little wonder he had such a dark, tumultuous sleep. Perhaps he was frightened out of his mind at the impossible task before him.

However, events took a surprising turn. After falling into a deep sleep Abram could do nothing to help God and the result was that God alone, in a theophany of smoke and fire (anticipating Israel's guiding pillars of fire and cloud), walked between the pieces. In other words, God alone ratified the covenant. God alone accepted all the covenant obligations. God alone took upon Him the solemn oaths and imprecations should He fail. God was saying: "I assume full responsibility to give you the land, and if I don't, let me be cut in pieces." It was a pledge to death, as Professor Richard Pratt graphically describes:

By passing between the rows of carnage, God swore a curse on himself. He said, "If I do not keep my promise to you, Abram, may I be torn to pieces even as these animals have been torn." On threat of his own destruction, God promised that his power would give Abram dominion over the Promised Land.⁵

It was God who made promises to Abram, not Abram who made promises to God. The emphasis here is on the unilateral, unconditional and sovereign grace of God. Fulfilment does not depend on man's faith or faithfulness. The Lord assumed to himself the full responsibility for seeing that every covenant promise shall be realized. He graciously swore to His own destruction that He would give Abram these promises apart from Abram's own efforts.

Just as the defeated snake and the rainbow of peace signified spiritual blessings in the *Covenant of Grace*, so this ceremonial cutting signified God's unbreakable covenant

⁴ G J Wenham, *Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas: Word Books, Electronic Edition).

⁵ R Pratt, *Designed for Dignity* (New Jersey: P&R).

commitment and promises to His spiritual people. Indeed, can we not see a prefiguring of the death of Christ, who in the *Covenant of Grace* unilaterally took the curses of the broken *Covenant of Works* upon him. O P Robertson expresses this well:

But the death of Christ, the maker of the new covenant provided redemption from the curses incurred due to the violation of the old covenant. His 'blood of the covenant' inaugurated the new covenant while at the same time removing the curses of the old covenant....By bearing the full consequences of covenantal pledge-to-death, Christ delivers from the curse of the covenant. No remission from guilty transgression could be gained without the shedding of blood. Christ therefore presented his body as the sacrificial victim of the covenantal curse. His flesh is torn that God's word to the patriarch might be fulfilled. Now he offers himself to you. He says: 'Take, eat; this is my body. This is my blood of the covenant shed for many. Drink, all of you, of it.'⁶

2. Man Cuts

One would have thought that such an awesome covenant sign would make Abram's faith unbreakable and unshakeable. However, in chapter 16, Abram's faith fails. In Chapter 15 God said to Abram, "I'll do everything for you" but God was too slow for Abram's liking. He turned away from the Divine promise, turned to his Egyptian handmaid, and sought a child according the flesh (Gal.4:23). The natural generation did not bring peace; only the child granted by God's supernatural intervention could do that.

In mercy, God then came and gave a more permanent sign of the *Covenant with Abraham* to encourage and strengthen patient faith in the covenant promises. That more permanent sign was circumcision. This rite would not only and always remind Abraham (name now changed) and his descendents of his sinful turning to Egypt (Hagar) for a human solution to his problems, but would also remind them of their need for national separation from heathen nations upon pain of death.

This external sign of the *Covenant with Abraham* also points to spiritual realities in the *Covenant of Grace*. There are three principal ideas suggested. Firstly, circumcision of the male reproductive organ would ever remind the Jews that God would bless the world through the physical Seed of Abraham, and that they should wait in faith for this divinely promised Seed. Secondly, it signified Christ's death, as He was cut off out of the land of the living, shed his blood and died (Col.2:11). Thirdly, the same verse in Colossians and other Scripture passages also explain that circumcision points not so much to the death of Christ for sin, but the death of sin in the Christian. Circumcision, then, pointed the believer to the need for spiritual separation upon pain of death (Deut.10:16; 30:6; Jer.32:39; Ezek.11:19; Rom.2:28-29; Col.2:11).

God was saying to Abraham: "You can't take my promises and do what you want." In Genesis 17 God talked about all the things he would do for Abraham. Then He turned to Abraham and said, "As for you....circumcised". God was saying: "It is time to cut again Abraham (see chapter 15), but this time you go under the knife." Just as the foreskin is cut aside and dies, so those who violate covenant responsibilities will be cut off and die. In Genesis 15 God used a knife to assure Abraham that he would receive great blessings if he believed. In Genesis 17 God tells Abraham to bring out the knife again, not to assure, but to warn that blessing will only come if he perseveres in patient faith. Circumcision is saying: "We deserve to be cut off and die, as our foreskin is cut off and dies, if we break our pledge of fidelity to God."

⁶ O P Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Philipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1980), 140ff.

Is God changing the rules here? Has He changed from a gracious to a legal covenant? Has it gone from "I'll do everything" to "I do a bit and you do a bit"? No, the *Covenant with Abraham* reveals and teaches the difference and relation between faith and works in the *Covenant of Grace*. God's grace is never given to encourage disobedience but to set free from sin to live lives of thankful obedience. Genesis 15 opposes salvation by works, but Genesis 17 opposes the idea of salvation that does not produce works. Genesis 15 opposes "Just do your best", but Genesis 17 opposes the idea of "Just believe". Genesis 15 says "There is forgiveness with thee", but Genesis 17 says "That thou mayest be feared" (Ps.130:4). Genesis 15 says "Jesus is Saviour", but Genesis 17 says "Jesus is Lord".

This *Covenant with Abraham* reveals the spiritual essence of the *Covenant of Grace*. At its heart is "God's cutting" (signifying the crucifixion of Christ). God unilaterally promises to do everything to secure the salvation of His people, even if it requires His death. However, "man's cutting" (circumcision) is to remind His people what they deserve (to be cut off by death) if they do not cut off themselves from sin. The knife, then, has two applications, one God-ward and the other man-ward.

SUMMARY

The revelation and administration of the *Covenant of Grace* is progressing. The external physical signs in the Covenants with Adam, Noah and Abraham revealed inward spiritual realities in the *Covenant of Grace*. In the *Covenant with Adam* the defeated serpent revealed victory over the Devil. In the *Covenant with Noah* the rainbow revealed peace with God. In the *Covenant with Abraham* the "two-edged" knife revealed God's solemn pledge to fulfil His promises upon pain of death, but also humanity's responsibility to cut off sin upon pain of death. It also have pointed to the Promised Seed.

Let us go back to our dark but brightening cathedral. Sin-darkened humanity is benefiting from light now shining through the snake-shaped and rainbow-shaped windows. In the *Covenant with Abraham*, God effectively cuts another window, this time in the shape of a two-edged knife. This time the light that shines through is confined to the natural descendents of Abraham and those associated with them. All the natural descendents of Abraham benefit from God's promises of seed and land, together with His promise to bless and curse other nations according to their treatment of Abraham and his descendants. Again, some just take the benefits of the natural light and some just admire the window (this is what the Jews did in Jesus day [John 8:33-43]). Others, however, look through the window by faith and see a more wonderful spiritual reality shining brightly through it. The knife reminds them of God's cutting (His covenant commitment to provide seed and land) and man's cutting (God's covenant demands of holy separation). The knife in the *Covenant with Abraham* revealed sufficient of the *Covenant of Grace* to enable Abraham to put His faith in the Christ of the Covenant, God's ultimate seed who would purchase and inherit the ultimate land for His people (Lk.1:72-74; Acts 3:25-26).

Have you followed Abraham's faith? Have you used the covenant sign of the two-edged knife to lead you to the Christ of the Covenant who was cut off out of the land of the living, in order to ensure that His people would be cut off from sin and death?