

## Life of Abraham

November 21, 2011

### Genesis 15

As this chapter begins, Abram had just been victorious, completely victorious over four Canaanite kings. The Lord had truly blessed Abram far above and beyond what could normally have been expected. He was faced with four kings who appear to have lived in warfare, while Abram had no experience in warfare, nor were his servants trained for combat like they had to face in chapter 14 to secure Lot's freedom, the freedom of his family and servants, as well as the security of all that he possessed. Victory often creates problems that we do not think about until victory is ours.

**15:1** It is important for us to see that before Abram could spend any time rejoicing in his victory, fear had gripped his heart. What was he afraid of? The nature of the Lord's words to him show us very clearly that he was afraid of retaliation from Chedorlaomer and the three kings who were his allies. That was usually what a victor in warfare, even then, could expect.

But Calvin mentioned a couple of other dangers which may have been a problem to Abram. One was that his victory might arouse the suspicions of the Canaanites who so far had been very accepting of Abram and his family, thinking that Abram might turn his forces against them. Then, closely related to that was the thought that Abram might have entertained the thought that he could take the land for himself, and so not wait on the Lord nor trust the Lord to give him the land in His time. I think it is doubtful if these are legitimate suggestions, but no one can say.

What we do know was that he was afraid of retaliation from the four kings he had defeated.

One thing that is important for us to notice is that before he sought the Lord, the Lord came to him, because the Lord was fully aware of what Abram feared. This is not to say that Abram would not have eventually sought the Lord's help, but it is an illustration of a wonderful truth that the Lord Jesus expressed when He was here on earth, that "your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him" (Matt. 6:8). That is always true, but often it is our experience because He comes to our aid before we ask Him for help.

The Lord appeared to Abram "in a vision," which means that Abram saw something. We know that He did not actually see God because the Apostle John has told us in John 1:18 that no man has ever seen God. But Abram could have seen something of the glory of God, or, if Abram did see a Person, it could have been what we call a preincarnate appearance of Christ, an appearance of Christ before He became a Man.

Anyway the Lord comforted Abram in two ways, by His appearance to Abram, and by the word of God.

One thing that Dr. Chafer used to say about God in our theology classes at Dallas Seminary, was, "God is propitious." More than once he got up from the desk where he was seated to teach us, and he would write these three words of the blackboard: "God is propitious." This means that *God is favorably disposed toward us*. He is inclined by His very nature to love us, to want to help us, to come to our aid. We don't have to convince Him that He should help us. He is ready to help us before we are ready to be helped. Genesis 15:1 is one of many illustrations we have in Scripture that God is propitious, propitious toward those of us who are His people. We don't have to convince Him to be favorable toward us. He is that way by His nature.

Now Abram was already afraid. Sarai may not have known that he was. His servants may have not seen any evidence that He was afraid, *but God knew! And Abram knew*. Think of the many times that we are told in the Bible, "Fear not." I have never counted them, but I was told once that there are at least three hundred and sixty-

five, one for each day of the year. And as we read this, we need to ask ourselves, “Am I afraid? What am I afraid of, or who am I afraid of?” It God tells us not to fear, but we do, then we have to realize that we are sinning! It is natural for us to fear. We fear that which we cannot control or that over which we have no power. But God never fears because He is omnipotent. So if we are trusting Him, we have no reason to be afraid.

When God told Abram, “Fear not,” He was asking Abram to do something which he could not do. Perhaps he could cut down on his fear, but it was impossible for Abram not to fear at all. And it is impossible for you and for me too. And yet, Abram as responsible to God not to fear. How could he possibly obey?

Well, the answer in Abram’s situation was not in himself, but in the Lord, or God. “I” am emphatic. The “am” is not in the original text, although the idea is there. But a literal translation would be, “I, thy Shield, and thy exceeding great reward.” The Lord was both. He was both to Abram, and He is both to us. When we get to heaven I am sure that we are going to be amazed at how many times the Lord has defended us in different ways, and the we have been rewarded in just as many times so that our lives have been totally different than they would have otherwise been if it had not been for Who the Lord is, and what He has done for us. Abram knew that the Lord was sufficient to protect him, and to reward him. *And that is why the name of Chedorlaomer never appears in the record of Abram’s life again!*

But the Lord had hardly gotten those words out of his mouth when Abram presented another problem he had to the Lord. It didn’t fall into the same category in Abram’s mind that the kings did, but it was something that Abram did not know how it would be accomplished. And so he had come up with another idea, and now was coming to the Lord to present it to Him.

**15:2** When we can’t see how some particular thing is going to happen, then we resort to the ways that such a need could be met on a human level.

Now let me point out that the Lord does not make promises like we do. We often make promises that we are not able to fulfil. Sometimes we forget about them. At other times we run into situations that keep us from doing what we have promised that we would do. But God never makes a promise which He forgets, nor which time shows that He cannot do. What was the promise?

He had promised that he was going to make from Abram “a great nation.” But when the Lord first gave that promise to Abram in Ur of the Chaldees, he did not even have a son. And now, after many years, he and Sarai had both gotten older, and they still did not have a son. So what hope was there that the descendants of Abram would ever become a great nations? Humanly speaking there was no hope, and the situation looked more hopeless with the passing of each day. So what was Abram to do? We always get off on the wrong track when we try to solve the Lord’s problems for Him – if it is even right to call them “problems.”

Well, the custom in that day was that if a man and his wife had no children, then a male child who was born in his house, of his own servants, would be his heir. So Abram had started to think about Eliezer. Why he is called Eliezer of Damascus, we do not know except that it might be that his father was a Syrian of Damascus. Probably Abram knew that Eliezer did not really fit into God’s promise, but it was the best Abram could do to figure out how the promise of God would be fulfilled.

This tells us that the way we would fulfil God’s promises are never as good as when God fulfils them. So we need to wait upon the Lord because that is the best way, and because it is not really our business to fulfil the promises of God. Promises are given for us to believe, not to obey, or to take it upon ourselves to do what God

has promised that He would do. Note that Abram's idea does not fit in with what he called the Lord, "Lord God," *the almighty Jehovah*. The only point Eliezer had going for him was that he had been born in Abram's house. And he may have been a grown man at this time.

**15:3** This "man of faith," as we have chosen to call him, is showing at this point, that his faith was weak, mainly because he was trying to figure out the will of God, rather than just to trust the Lord, believing that the Lord knew what He was doing, and would keep his promise to Abram at the right time and in the right way.

**15:4** I have often wished that the Lord would respond to us as quickly and as clearly as He did to Abram in this case. Moses in writing about this, said, that "the word of the Lord came" to Abram, and Abram heard the Lord say to him, "This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir." So that put an end to Abram's attempt to help the Lord find a way to do what He had promised that He would do!

**15:5** This is a verse which shows us how important it is to believe the word of God. The Lord took Abram outside. It was night, a clear night, and the stars were all shining in all their glory. Then the Lord asked Abram to count the stars, which Abram could not do, there were so many of them. But then the Lord said to Abram, "So shall thy seed be."

The point is that if God is so great that He could make all of those myriads of stars, and keep them shining, then it was no difficulty to take one of the sons of Joseph, and make his descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven.

And then we have one of the most important verses in all of the Bible: Genesis 15:6. It is quoted in Romans 4:3, 9, 22; Gal. 3:6; James 2:28. It is the basic truth of the Gospel, that our eternal salvation is based on faith alone, in the promise of God alone, and which has to do with the Person and Work of Christ alone!

I hope that you all remember that I believe that Abram was saved in Ur of Chaldees before he ever left home to go to the promised land. And I said that because of what we read in Hebrews 11:8:

By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.

He could not have done anything by faith unless he had been a believer. Now when we come to Genesis 15:6 we read that Abram "believed in the Lord; and it was counted to him for righteousness." This is the doctrine of justification. It does not mean that Abram was not saved until this point, nor does it mean that he was saved a second time. But we simply have another step in the doctrine of salvation. Salvation is by faith in God. Later we learn that salvation is by faith in Christ crucified, buried, raised, and now seated at the Father's right hand. We even learn that the present ministry of Christ in heaven is a part of our salvation. He is able to save to the end, completely, and those who come to God by Him, "seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for us" (Heb. 7:25). Abram's obedience was not a requirement for his salvation, but a result, the evidence, that he was saved. When Paul was asked by the Philippian jailor, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" He was given the one, true answer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (Acts 16:30-31). We now know that believing in the Lord Jesus Christ means believing Who He is, the Son of God Who became a Man Who died on the Cross bearing our sins and paying our debt in full. Thus, we are declared to be righteous, not because of anything that we have done for God, but because Jesus Christ died for our sins, securing the forgiveness of our sins, and thus declared by God to be righteous.

From verse 7 on to the end of this chapter we have the Lord responding to Abram concerning another aspect of

the Abrahamic covenant, the promised land.

**15:7** Now the Lord brought up the subject of the land. Abram knew that he was in the land, but and he knew that this was the land that the Lord had promised him. But how that was going to be Abram did not know. Here the Lord indicated that He had not forgotten any detail of the promise that He had given to Abram, but our Lord's words here seem to indicate that He wanted to know how it would come about. Would the Lord wait until Abram's seed had increased in number so that they could take the land by force?

So, in verse 8 we have Abram's question.

**15:8** Again Abram addressed the Lord as the mighty Lord. And his question was not so much how the land would become his and his seeds', but just the assurance that some day it would be their's. Some look upon Abram's question here as a sign of a weak faith, but it seems to me that Abram was rather seeking to have his faith strengthened. Now that Abram was in the land and could see what a major project was ahead of him and his family, he was asking for assurance that some day the promises of God would be fulfilled.

Now what follows amounts to what signing a contract would be today.

**15:9** The Lord here told Abram to take two animals, a heifer and a she goat, and two birds, a turtledove and a young pigeon. It might have seemed strange to Abram at first, but his faith was to be demonstrated by doing what the Lord told him to do.

**15:10** Abram was to divide the bodies of the two animals, and to lay their bodies out so that it would be possible to walk between them. At this time it may have become clearer to Abram and others who could have been watching Abram what the Lord was preparing for him to do.

Thus they would have the two parts of the heifer laid out so that a person could walk between them, and behind them lay out the two parts of the goat's body in the same way. The birds were not to be divided, but they were to be killed and one bird laid on one side of the pathway and the other bird on the other side.

**15:11** It seems here that we are to recognize the work of Satan in seeking to destroy what God was doing.

Perhaps you remember in the parable of the sower which the Lord taught and is recorded for us in Matthew 13, that our Lord said that the seed which was sown by the wayside, that "the fowls came and devoured them up. And when He went on to interpret what that meant, He said that the birds represent the wicked one, who is the Devil, snatched the Word away before it could take root in the hearts of the hearers.

So I believe that here these birds were seeking to eat the animals and the birds to prevent the Lord from doing what He was beginning to do. Perhaps we need to add here what James wrote about the Devil when in James 4:7b we read, "Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you." So here the birds came, but Abram drove them away, thus keeping the Devil from hindering the work of the Lord.

**15:12** Darkness was coming on. Abram, probably exhausted with driving the birds away, plus with all that had taken place, fell into a deep sleep, and we are told that "an horror of great darkness fell upon him." And we learn from verse 13 the prophecy which was revealed to Abram at that time.

**15:13** Here Abram was told about what we know now was the years that the descendants of Abram were to spend in bondage, in Egypt. It would not be in the land that the Lord was giving to them, but in another

land, and they would serve the people there, and be afflicted by them, for a period of four hundred years. This would not have been good news for Abram, but it all was for the purpose of strengthening his faith in seeing that from His descendants captivity and suffering, his descendants would survive. So the first twelve chapters of Exodus are written into this one verse.

It seems that the perfection of God's people is always related in one way or another, or in one way and another, to suffering. In 1 Peter 5:8-11, which was Pastor Will's text last Sunday, the Apostle Peter spoke of the opposition that we are to expect from the Devil and from the world, but how God uses suffering for His glory and our glorification. Here those words again:

8 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:

9 Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world.

10 But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you.

11 To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

**15:14** But God always gets the last word. His purposes are accomplished, his will is done. Egypt would be judged, and the children of Israel came out "with great substance." The people of Israel actually very wealthy. This should encourage our faith in God and in His Word because all that the Lord said to Abram came to pass as He predicted.

**15:15** Even Abram would not live to see the promise fulfilled even though he lived to be 175 years old.

**15:16** The first part of this verse goes back to verse 14 when the Lord led the people of Israel under the leadership of Joshua. And the reason that the Lord did not act sooner was not because of Israel, but because "the iniquity of the Amorites (including all of the Canaanites) was not yet full."

(On this statement, that "the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet full," read Calvin's comment in his commentary on Genesis, from the top of p. 419, beginning with, "And this passage is remarkable," to the top of p. 420.)

**15:17** In the confirming of a covenant, the responsible parties pass between the pieces of animals, and the birds. What happened, and what does it mean?

The smoking furnace with its burning lamp was a symbol of the presence of God Himself. What about Abram? Did he pass between the pieces also? No! And so what are we to learn? *That the covenant which God made with Abram was dependent only on the power and faithfulness of the Lord God.*

And so it is with our salvation. It is not our faithfulness to God, but His faithfulness to us. It is not our work, but it is His work. Salvation is wholly a work of God. He is the Giver; we are the receivers. We work after we are saved, not even to secure our salvation, but to show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

The remaining verses of the chapter (**15:18-21**) give us the dimensions of the land the Lord had given to the descendants of Abram, not by the dimensions of the territory, but by the people who were the resident at that time. The time came for them when their cup of iniquity was full. America, beware!