

We get to look into one of the great chapters in the Bible.

In the Abraham story presented in Genesis, there are three great chapters that lay out the nature of the promise of God.

This chapter...

Then there is chapter 17 where the promise itself takes 8 verses followed by the introduction of circumcision.

God then changes Abram's name to Abraham.

And, finally there is chapter 22 when God orders Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the son of the promise...

And, at the last moment, God offers a ram in the place of Isaac as a substitutionary sacrifice.

In these chapters we learn, through Abraham's experience, about the God who makes promises.

Pray

Not for one minute this week did I work on this passage without thinking about Alex Horstman in the hospital.

The surgery could not have went better, but then there were some blood pressure complications.

We were all praying, and then what were minor concerns turned into major concerns with antibody mediated rejection.

But, the doctors had a plan to deal with that and we were all praying to the God who makes our bodies work, the great physician.

But, then Alex had an allergic reaction to the treatment and almost died. We prayed. God saved him, using doctors.

A second try at the procedure went well, but concerns continue, as do the prayers.

It seems at times that trusting in the God who makes promises is like living life on an emotional roller-coaster.

We pray. God answers, but not how we wanted Him to.

Disaster strikes, but we are His children! So we cry out to Him... and He seems not to hear.

Then He finally does answer and, again, it is not what we wanted... at least what we thought we wanted.

We don't mind some suffering, but we'd rather have a little less of it and have it be shorter and less painful.

And, then, when we are rescued after the suffering, it would be nice if we were in better shape than we seem to be.

What is God up to? What is He doing? What kind of promise-keeping is this?

Ultimately, our question is the same on about which Abram is learning in Genesis 15...

What is it like to believe God who makes promises?

Abram has been learning from God about God and about what it is like to live under promises made by God.

In Gen. 12 we learned that God picked Abram out from among all the descendants of Noah, and thus Adam.

We have learned that God has created everything good, but sin has marred His creation.

Sin is essentially God's creatures not wanting to live under God's direction, People want to live their own way.

The result is rebellion, pain, selfishness, murder, and all kinds of wickedness.

It is like a disease that cannot be controlled or wiped out without destroying the entire human race, and God will not do that.

And, so, God has a plan to deal with sin and bring blessing to His people in His creation.

The plan, apparently, involves Abram. But, we do not know how just yet.

What we do know is this: The plan involves God's promise to one man, Abram.

It is a promise of descendants.

It is a promise of land.

It is a promise of blessing so that Abram and his descendants will be a blessing to the whole earth.

Abram is learning that when God makes a promise, He does whatever it takes to keep that promise.

When Abram's wife was taken from him in Egypt, God got her back with interest.

Even though Abram was not yet in possession of the promised land, God took him on a tour of it anyway.

And, when Abram went to war to rescue his nephew, God gave him victory and blessed him even then.

Abram is learning what life is like living with a God who makes and keeps His promises.

However, this is all far from easy because, we are discovering, God does all this in His own time.

And, at the outset of this great 15th chapter of Genesis, we find Abram struggling with this promise.

I ought to point out that the Almighty Creator God is unique in these things.

Other gods, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, Norse, Buddha, Allah, mother earth, agnostic or deist gods, atheism...

These are not gods who make and keep promises no matter what.

They are capricious, unpredictable, manipulative, unaware of the future, and unreliable.

The God of the Bible is the only God who even claims unequivocal commitment to keeping His promises.

So, what is it like to live life, chosen by this God who makes and keeps promises?

I. Faith in spite of present appearances Gen. 15:1-7

At the outset of this chapter, God is reassuring Abram. Abram has just survived and won a war.

(vs. 1) God is assuring Abram of His protection. "I made you a promise. I will protect you so that you can get it."

And, that is reassuring, but maybe not where Abram feels he needs it.

You see, Abram is now somewhere around 80 years old, and he has no children.

How would you feel if you were 80 and childless and God was making promises to you and your descendants?

Notice the emphasis in Abram's response to God's reassurance. He says it twice.

vs. 2 "What will You give me, since I am childless?"

vs. 3 "You have given no offspring to me."

"You see God, reassurances are nice, but the real reassurance would be a baby!"

Let's see a little progress in the fulfillment of the promise.

We often feel that way as well, "God, let's see a little eternal reward right now! Some healing today!"

"Words are nice. Action is better, God."

OK, but consider how God responds to Abram. (vss. 4-5) More words, more promise, promise repeated...

We often experience the same thing. We say to God, "Lord show me the money!" "Heal me now!" "Save my son!"

And, we pray and pray, and open our Bibles and what does God do?

He gives us more words of assurance and promise.

What's going on? Is God toying with us? Is He trying to frustrate us?

Well, we discover along the way in this story of Abram learning about God and His promise that God can do more than one thing.

In fact, God is doing many things at once all the time.

He is keeping His promise to Abram, absolutely. He's going to get Abram there in the end.

But, God is doing something else along the way. He's doing something IN Abram.

Verse 6 contains the clue. In fact, you might say that this is Abram's life verse. It defines the whole story of Abraham.

Paul uses it in Rom. 4 to explain Abraham's salvation. **Rom. 4:1-5, 13-5:1**

So, as Abraham was saved by faith, so we are also.

But, does this explain why God did not answer his questions with what was asked for, but rather with more words of promise?

It does, for what, after all, is faith? **Heb. 11:1**

You see, in order for God to build faith you and I need a lot of not seeing yet those things we are hoping for.

II. Faith in spite of future problems **Gen. 15:8-16**

So, God has reassured Abram that he will have a child and he will have descendants.

Now God reassures him that he will possess the promised land, but he doesn't possess it.

So, Abram asks God a very sensible question, "How can I know this?" (vs. 8)

What God does next is very strange. He commands Abram to sacrifice animals and arrange them according to God's instruction.

We'll get back to this scene in a moment.

However, it is after Abram has followed instructions that God meets with him in an entirely different way.

(vs. 12) What is this? "deep sleep... a terror of great darkness..." = a nightmare

In this nightmare, God gives Abram a glimpse of the future... It is hardly encouraging.

"Descendants... strangers... enslaved and oppressed for 400 years..." = that's 400 years of... not blessing yet!

(vs. 14) Then they come out blessed... and return to the promised land, while Abram is long ago dead and buried.

I suppose that is good news after vs. 13... but what does it say about the promise?

It says this: The promise of God is going to be hard to believe for at least 400 years, maybe longer.

What would you think if God told you that He would bless your family greatly... 400 years from now.

I would instantly think... my wife? my son? my daughters? What about them?

Slavery, oppression? No thank you.

What is clear if you read your whole Bible, if you observe history, God is making clear to Abram 4,000 years ago.

The road to God's blessing is bumpy and stays bumpy. It never gets easy.

Do you think you have problems now on the way to the promises of God? Just wait until tomorrow. There will be more.

Anyone who tells you differently is lying.

Because God is always interested in building faith in you.

He gives you enough reassurance to get by, but not enough that you can see what you need to trust Him for.

And, when you think you see it... Nope, it was just a little part and God gets you right back to praying and trusting Him.

There is something else going on in this nightmare that God gives to Abram.

It is written here because Abram is dreaming of those for whom this story was first written.

When Moses wrote this story of Abraham down, the people of God were these people, 400 years in Egypt.

And, they are learning to trust the same God for the same promises... even though they cannot see the fulfillment.

And they too, if they want to be saved by this God, need to believe in Him and what He says in spite of present appearances.

They, like us, are being invited by this nightmare, and what God says in it, to exercise faith that is credited to them as righteousness.

Now, back to all the animals sacrificed and laid out just so...

III. Faith in the God who swears by Himself **Gen. 15:17-21**

God has confirmed His promise by His Word. That would be enough, but God does more.

One of the ways that kings or wealthy people would ratify a covenant or a treaty in ancient times was by a blood oath...

And, one kind of binding blood oath is what we find here.

The two parties would sacrifice a cow and/or other animals together and cut them in half.

They would arrange the pieces so that there was a ceremonial path between the halves.

Then, after publically making the agreement, they would walk together on the path between the pieces of animal.

Sounds barbaric? No so. It was memorable... and here is the meaning:

They are saying to one another and everyone, "Thus may you and God do to me if I break my promise."

Example: **Jer. 34:18-20**

But, there is something odd about what actually happens in Genesis 15. Abram does not pass through the animals.

(vs. 17) "smoking oven (fire pot, Dutch oven) and (with) flaming torch" = one thing = The Lord God in His holiness

This promise, the one in which Abram has placed his faith, depends only on the actions of God.

Whatever Abram might do, God will keep His promise.

This the reason for what God says to Abraham in **Gen. 22:15-18**. God's promise depends only on God.

And, the fulfillment of this promise continues to depend only on the Lord God who came and died for us so that we would be saved.

Isaiah 45:20-25 To the ends of the earth, God will keep His promise of salvation. That is who He is.