

## **Genesis 15<sup>1</sup>**

### ***Believe Enough to Trust God***

#### **Introduction**

The world-famous acrobat, Blondin, was born in France in 1824. Over the years, he became famous throughout Europe and America. In London he once played a violin on a tightrope high above the ground. In North America, he walked across Niagara Falls on a tightrope high above the water. One time he even pushed a wheelbarrow across while blindfolded. Another time, he stood on his head on the wire. Still another time he carried his manager across on his back. When he made it to the other side, he looked into the crowd and asked a man standing near, "Do you believe I could do that with you?" The man answered, "Of course, I've just seen you do it." Then Blondin said, "If you trust me to also bring you safely to the other side, then hop on and I'll carry you across." The man quickly said, "You must be kidding! No way!"

We can suffer the same disconnect between our belief and our trust. There's a great difference between believing someone in the head and believing enough to trust that someone in the heart.

(<http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-matthew-sickling-stories-32222.asp>)

Genesis 15 is a passage that challenges us not simply to believe God in the head, but more importantly, to believe enough to trust Him in the heart. This implies committing ourselves to give "hands and legs" to our belief as we respond to God's promises with trusting obedience.

God's call to Abraham at this point is "do not be afraid" (v. 1).<sup>2</sup> But what did Abraham have to fear? Well, he certainly could fear retaliation after his shocking defeat of the four kings from Mesopotamia (Gen 14).

But his greater fear no doubt would relate to God's promise to give him a son. Many years earlier the Lord had said he would give Abraham descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth (Gen 13:16). Even then Abraham was over 75 years old. Now he's at least 85 and not getting any younger. His wife Sarah was far past childbearing age. Even though he had just won a great victory, nothing could satisfy his deep longing for a son.

I think Abraham's greatest fear at this time in Gen 15 had to do with the fact that God did not seem to be in a hurry to give him a son.

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<sup>1</sup> 1984 NIV

<sup>2</sup> Note: God changed the name Abram to Abraham in Gen 17:5.

- “How much longer must I wait?”
- “Why does God delay?”
- “Has God changed His mind?”
- “Is there some sin in my life that is displeasing to God?”
- “Should I go for Plan B?”

These must be some questions running through Abraham’s mind. But God knew exactly what His servant was thinking. He saw the doubt. He understood the fear. Now He reassured Abraham that all would be well.

Genesis 15 contains two promises God gave to Abraham. From these two promises we learn great truths about God.

### **I. Promise # 1: “A son from your own body” (vv. 1-6)**

1 After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."

2 But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"

3 And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

4 Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir."

5 He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

God had promised Abraham a son from his own biological body. And God affirmed that promise by declaring, “I am your shield” (v. 1). When God declares that He is our shield, He affirms two specific things:

- He protects us in times of doubt.
- He rescues us in times of danger.

To be sure, we aren’t immune to sadness and mishaps. What happens to others also happens to us. But the difference is this—we know that God watches over us such that nothing can touch us without first passing through Him.

That knowledge doesn’t mean we don’t weep or we don’t suffer. But it is the basis for the statement that asserts “we grieve but not as those who have no hope”. We grieve, but we grieve differently precisely because we hope in God.

Besides declaring Himself to be a shield to Abraham, God once again promised descendants without number. This time He told Abraham to look at

the stars (v. 5)—“Look up at the heavens and count the stars ... So shall your offspring be.”

The response of Abraham to God’s promise in v. 5 is found in v. 6—he “believed in the Lord ...” One crucial word in v. 6 is the word “believed”. In the Hebrew, this word is related to the word “amen”. To believe God is to say “amen” to His promises. It means to rest your entire weight on the truth of what God has said or done.

*Truth: Many things are humanly impossible even if we try our utmost. But everything is possible with God if He has indeed promised.*

With that we now move on to the second great promise God made to Abraham.

## **II. Promise # 2: “I will give you this land” (vv. 7-21)**

7 He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it."

8 But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"

9 So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon."

10 Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half.

11 Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

12 As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.

13 Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.

14 But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.

15 You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age.

16 In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

17 When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates –

19 the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites,

20 Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites,

21 Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."

Several details of this passage may seem obscure because they rest on ancient practices that are quite foreign to our experience. Basically, God is

here making a formal agreement called a covenant with Abraham. A covenant then was a means of making an agreement binding. It was formalized through a ceremony known as “cutting the covenant”. The two parties involved would bring animals for sacrifice. The animals were each cut into halves and laid in two parallel rows. Then the two parties involved would walk side-by-side between the rows of dead animals as an act of ratifying the covenant.<sup>3</sup>

This signified two things:

- A joint commitment to honour the terms agreed upon.
- A vow that if any of the terms was violated by either party, the violator would be “ripped apart to death” (i.e. would suffer the same fate as the animals).

The most important point in this passage is the fact that God (whose presence was symbolized by the smoking firepot and the blazing torch) passed between the dead animals while Abraham slept.

And you know what that means? That means God was taking upon Himself the full responsibility for keeping the covenant. It’s as if God was saying, “Go ahead and sleep, Abraham. This one is my responsibility. Your promised son is not yet but he will come. Your promised land will come after your time, and be possessed by your descendants, not immediately with ease but after four generations of hardship. You may waver and stray in your belief in this covenant.<sup>4</sup> But I swear in my own name that I myself will be responsible to keep it. Otherwise, let me and not you be ripped apart.” This is in essence what God was saying in His unilateral ratification of the covenant here.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the literal, physical recipients of the promise made to Abraham 4000 years ago are still here today. They are the Jews. Despite the passage of 4000 years and some very determined efforts to wipe them out, the Jews remain until today because God has not finished with them yet. When God makes a promise, He keeps it. Their survival story over the centuries started with God’s promise to bless Abraham with numerous descendants and land.

I now come back to that one key issue in Gen 15. Why did God wait so long to give Abraham a son?

Of all the questions that plague the people of God, none is as vexing as the question of long-delayed answers to things we have prayed so much about.

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<sup>3</sup> The dove and pigeon were offered for forgiveness (sin offering) and worship (burnt offering) as required by the OT Law (Lev 14:30-31). Perhaps, the covenant in Gen 15 is unique and includes dove and pigeon since it is not one between man and man, but one between God and man.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, Abraham did waver and stray in Gen 16.

<sup>5</sup> I believe we also see here an expression of the Lord’s mercy in making Abraham a sleeping partner—He knew Abraham would suffer the fate of being ripped apart because he would fail as a frail man in covenant-keeping.

Why does God at times take so long to answer our deepest, most heart-felt prayers?

God's answer to fear is not an argument or a formula. It's a Person. That's why He said to Abraham, "Fear not. I am your shield." God Himself is the ultimate answer to every fear of the human heart.

Have you ever wondered why God called Himself by the name "I AM" in the Old Testament? Certainly it has to do with his eternal existence. But there is also a word of personal encouragement in that name.

Think of it this way. Who is God to you? According to His name, He is the essence of whatever you need at the moment.

- "I AM your strength."
- "I AM your courage."
- "I AM your hope."
- "I AM your supply."
- "I AM your defender."
- "I AM your deliverer."
- "I AM your forgiveness."
- "I AM your joy."
- "I AM your future."

What is one long-delayed desire/prayer in your heart right now? Are you vexed by it because it is still so slow in coming to pass?

But God is reassuring you today: "Take heart, my child. I AM your strength, your courage, your hope, and your future."

*Truth: God is saying, "I do not over-promise and under-deliver. I AM big enough to make good my promises and meet your needs."*

We must believe God enough to trust Him. Our belief in Him in the head must be translated into trust in Him in the heart. So, let's now wrap up by looking at two actions that will move us from passive belief to active trust in God.

### **III. Moving from Passive Belief to Active Trust**

If I were to measure your BQ (Believing Quotient), what would it be from a scale of 1 to 10? Do you believe God enough to trust Him and obey now? What are the concerns that are holding you back?

How do we increase our BQ (Believing Quotient) and overcome our OI (Obedience Inertia) so that we can move from passive belief to active trust?

- *Trust God's timing and not our own.* Many of our struggles with fear and doubt start right here. Like Abraham, we have waited and waited, perhaps for many years. Even though we may have seen many

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remarkable answers to prayer, the one thing that means the most to us has still not come to pass—"Where is God? Why doesn't He answer that fervent, heart-felt prayer of mine?"

Of the many answers that might be given to this struggle, one answer must be that God's timing and ours are often quite different. And we must learn to trust in God's perfect timing.

It is wise to obey in God's time and let things fall in place, than to operate in our time and let things fall apart.

Things fall apart when we get outside of God to get what we want, and then stay outside of God to keep what we want.

Is God in control, or is He not in control? If God is in control, then He is always on schedule—never early; never late. He never forgets and is always on time. So we can still trust God in spite of our circumstances.

- *Trust God to obey Him one step at a time.* This principle is often overlooked by those seeking to do God's will. God promised a child and Abraham desperately wanted to see the fulfilment of that promise. So what did God tell him to do? Round up the animals for a sacrifice. Perhaps, Abraham didn't have a clue what God was doing. He was simply told to round up the animals and get ready for a sacrifice, even though it didn't seem to have anything to do with his "dream son".

We are often stumbled by this today. So, we neglect our obedience of today because we are dreaming about some distant tomorrow. But until we have done what God has called us to do today, we will never be prepared for what He wants us to do tomorrow. We want to see from A to Z before we act/obey. But God wants us to act/obey on A first before granting us greater clarity and certainty for the next steps.

Believe enough to trust God means taking the first step—whatever it is—and walking with God wherever He leads us. Sometimes it makes sense, other times it doesn't seem so. But we still have to take that step if we are going to do God's will in His way.

## Conclusion

Everything I've been trying to say in this message comes down to one simple question—"Can God be trusted to do what He has promised?" If the answer is "yes", then we must move from passively believing Him in the head to actively trusting Him in the heart. By our obedience we declare that not only we believe God CAN do what He has promised, but more importantly, He WILL do what He has promised in His way and in His time.

So, fear not. Our God can be trusted to keep His promises. Nothing can happen to us except it first passes through the hands of God. If your way is dark today, keep on believing.

Matt 10:29-31 reads, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care ... So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

*You and I are of much worth to God. Though His eyes may be on the sparrows, He has promised to watch over you and me.*

We are much more than earthly sparrows. We are the Lord's sheep.

So, let's decide this day not merely to believe God, but to believe Him enough to actively trust in His unfailing love and faithfulness in the days ahead. Amen!