



Part 35 – Faith and Righteousness

Genesis 15:1-6

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Genesis 15. It contains within it the principle of justification by faith and the formalizing of God's everlasting covenant of grace. The promise God makes to Abram and ratifies through a formal ceremony is the very promise (or covenant) that Jesus Christ came to fulfill; the very promise under which Christians are saved today.

Chapter 15 describes two Divine encounters (vv. 1-6 & 7-21). Both encounters involve a dialogue between Abram and Yahweh. There are also signs pointing symbolically to God's presence and promises. In the first encounter, God speaks to Abram by night by means of a vision concerning the promised seed. The second encounter takes place at dusk and concerns the promised land.¹

1. Promise

Vs. 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.’”

- Meredith Kline suggests that, coming directly after victory in battle, the word the Lord speaks to Abram “has the character of a royal grant to an officer for faithful military service.”² Certainly, this is formal speech from the Lord complete with the announcement of a great reward.
- The LORD calls Abram to “fear not.” After such a stunning victory we may wonder what Abram had to fear. Perhaps the LORD is addressing the fear that is building within Abram that the divine promise will not be fulfilled. Perhaps Abram feared that the four kings from the east would reorganize their forces and pursue him. Perhaps Abram's fear came from the fact that he was hearing directly from God Almighty. It is helpful that the passage does not specify the source of Abram's fear. In this way we can hear those same words of assurance addressing our own fears. Our Lord knows us through and through. He knows our thoughts from afar and discerns our hearts every moment. And into the chaos of fears that often beset us he speaks his assuring “fear not.”

2. Complaint

Vv. 2-3 – [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.”

- Verse 2 is the first record we have of Abram speaking to God. That does not mean that he had spoken to God prior to this. It does mean that the inspired writer sees this as the best time to introduce Abram's speaking to God. And it comes in the form of complaint.
- The term *complaint* in this context does not mean the sort of petulant, spoiled, belly-aching that the word is typically associated with today. Rather, complaint refers to what is sometimes seen in the prayers of God's people as they rehearse the promises of God. They know what God has promised and either because of their own misunderstanding or because of God's delay in delivering on the promise they raise their voice in dismay. As we know from certain Psalms for instance, there is a faith-filled way to lift up a complaint before the Lord. And this is what Abram is doing in verse 2.
- Abram's complaint arises precisely because he has believed the Lord's promise and yet he wonders how such a promise can be fulfilled after such a long time. True, there was a person in place – Eliezer – who could serve as Abram's legal heir (he was likely a young man or boy whom Abram could legally adopt to carry on his name). But the promise is that Abram would have his own child. The Lord had promised Abram to give Canaan to Abram's “seed” (12:7) not simply a legal heir. Keep in mind that when Abram led his family out of Ur, Sarai was already barren. Now Abram is some 80 years old and Sarai's

¹ Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A New Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) p. 238

² Ibid

barrenness is all the more heightened by her advanced years. How, Abram wonders, can God fulfill his promise?

- Abram's faith in the Lord gives him the freedom to give voice to his complaint. Again, this is not a childish tantrum. Even in his complaint, Abram sees himself rightly in relation to God. Notice Abram's formal language of address: "O Lord GOD" - literally "Adonai Yahweh" (*Almighty Yahweh*). Though he has a complaint Abram has not lost sight of the fact that he is a servant of the LORD. Abram is speaking honestly before the LORD but not without first giving due recognition to the LORD's place of superiority and by implication his (Abram's) own humility as servant.
- Abram's complaint demonstrates just how much God's promise meant to him. His belief was so substantial that he built his life upon it. The promise had come to define his life. His words of dismay over what he considered to be a too long delay in fulfillment came out of his utter conviction that God is trustworthy.

3. Assurance

- Vv. 4-5 – [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."
- The Lord answers Abram's complaint with kind decisiveness – "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir" (vs. 4). God immediately comforts Abram with a bold word of assurance. More than that he directs the gaze of the former moon worshipper to the darkening sky and challenges him to count the stars. While this episode still does not constitute fulfillment of the promise it is an effort to rivet Abram's imagination to the promise God has made. The fact remains that it is not yet time for the promise to be fulfilled. Abram must still wait. But for the time being God paints a picture across his imagination to calm his fears and quiet his dismay.
- God's Word is filled with such word pictures, metaphors, poetics, and well-crafted prose that we might have God's promises fixed to our minds and hearts. God does not give us such pictures to make his promises more sure. After all, his promises are the surest thing in all the universe. God's promises are more sure than the rising and setting of the sun. His promises are more sure than gravity. His promises are more sure than the delightfulness of Georgia peaches or the beauty of a Sante Fe sunset. God is not seeking to make his promises more sure but to make us more sure of his promises.³

4. Faith

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

- The word translated "believed" can just as easily be translated from the Hebrew as "trusted." Abram considered God to be trustworthy and reliable. We are reminded here as to why Abraham is the father of the faithful (Romans 4:11; Galatians 3:7).
- The verb translated "he counted it" denotes how persons are evaluated and categorized. "The expression means that God reckons Abraham's faith in the promise as righteousness."⁴ This is the clearest articulation of the doctrine of imputed righteousness that we have so far in the Bible. It is a doctrine which will remain at the heart of how God justifies his people by counting them as righteous. The justification for this imputed righteousness is grounded in the dying and rising of Christ who on the cross had our sins imputed to him so that he might impute his righteousness to us. Any attempt to undermine or lessen the importance of the doctrine of imputation actually undermines the gospel itself and thus the believer's assurance.
- "Righteousness" refers to that which conforms to God's standards. God counts Abraham's faith in his promise as righteousness. This verse is foundational to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Abraham is not sinless and yet God counts his faith as equivalent to meeting all of his moral demands so that he may stand before God justified (not by works but by God's grace working through faith). This is how God has always saved his people. Abraham was saved by grace through faith looking forward to the Christ. We are saved by grace through faith as we look back to what Christ has done in his dying and rising.

³ Dale Ralph Davis, *Faith of Our Father* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2015) p. 51

⁴ Waltke, 242