

ABRAHAM pt.8 Genesis 15:1-5 11-22-15

THE ORIGINAL PROMISE KEEPER

(Genesis 15) We shall look today at the first six verses of Genesis 15 but let's recall what has just happened in chapter 14. Abraham had rustled up a small army and successfully assaulted the army of four eastern kings who had taken captive Abram's nephew Lot. Abram returns from this great victory to his home in Hebron and has a really cool experience. Well, "cool" probably isn't the word. "Awesome" would be better. "Fearful" maybe. He has in Genesis 15 another close encounter with our awesome God kind. 15:**1-6** (NIV) *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, "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 who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." 5 He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky 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.*

Before we get into our text for today I want to tell you how the sermon will end. That's not a good idea for movies, but I think will be okay for us today. At the end of my sermon, which will come without any warning, our projection wizard will flash a verse of Scripture on the screen and you will say it with me enthusiastically - because you will be so glad the sermon is over. So you aren't hesitant later the verse is this one. *Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!* Let's try it.... Good, you be ready to help me supply a good ending. Now, to what our text reveals about who our God is to us. And the understanding here is that our God is the same God to whom Abraham related those many years ago. In the first century, the apostle Paul, taught in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 that our relationship to God as Christians is little different than what we see in the life of Abraham. Abram's God is our God and when we read of Him in Genesis we learn about the Lord with whom we have to do. Three things we see today about who God is for His people.

First of all, God is a shield. ® He is a protector and defender for His people. And in a world like ours - that is something very precious. This commitment the Lord makes comes in the context of some reasonable fear on the part of Abram. God begins the conversation by saying,

“Do not fear, Abram.” What do you think Abram was afraid of here. Think about the context, about what just happened, about the ensuing conversation. What do you think he was afraid of? If you think you know, turn to a neighbor and say it. I think it could be any of several things. First of all, there is the obvious reality that God is here speaking to Abraham. That, in itself, is scary enough don’t you expect? The Scriptures describe this as a vision. How exactly it took place is hard to say, but Abram knows he is in the presence of God - and that alone is a frightening thing. Having visions is scary. The second possibility is that Abram is fearful of retaliation. For years he had lived in peace there in Canaan. He hadn’t bothered the neighbors, the neighbors hadn’t bothered him. That all ended in chapter 14. Chederlaomer, king of Elam, and three other kings, got to messing with Abram’s family. They picked a fight and Abram manned-up. As a result, our man Abe now had enemies. He had embarrassed and enraged the kings of the east. Before, they had ignored Abram and passed him by, but now - he had a bull’s-eye on his back. Our friend had some powerful enemies who gave him a reason to be afraid. Thirdly, it could be that Abram was becoming afraid of childlessness. The previous hypothesis flows out of the preceding context; this one comes from the context immediately following verse 1. There in verse 2 Abram expresses his concern about the childlessness problem. God had told him he would have a lot of descendants but Abram was growing too old for kids and his bride was still childless. He apparently had begun to worry that God was missing his chance to make them fruitful. Some of you have experienced this same fear haven’t you?

Anytime you experience fear there are two things you want to do. The first is to determine if it is a rational or irrational fear. For example, fear of heights is rational, fear of widths is irrational. Fear of rattle-snakes is rational, fear of black snakes is not. Now, we have both kinds of fears. At least I do. It’s a fascinating study to take a look at what people are afraid of. When I preached thru Exodus I spoke of Moses who was afraid to go speak for God before Pharaoh, but had the courage to pick up a hissing rattler snake, by the tail. I remember asking you the question, “Which would scare you more - picking up a rattler by the tail or addressing the king?” And the majority indicated it would be speaking to the king. Personally, I would rather tackle Pharaoh than a rattler any day. Our fears differ. Lots of times they makes no sense. Some are afraid of dogs, others of spiders, others of airplanes. I heard the story of one fella from back in the early days of flying. Joe was an old farmer who was afraid of flying, but when a barnstormer came to their town, charging folks for rides on his plane, some friends Joe’s put

their money together and bought him a ride. Joe reluctantly agreed to go and after the short spin his friends met him as he got off and said, “So tell us Joe, how was it?” He said, “Oh, it wasn’t too bad, but I never did put my whole weight down on the thing.” Some folks still struggle with flying. RC Sproul, one of my favorite teachers, won’t get on a plane. He travels by train. The irrational fears, if they are a problem, need to be tackled head on to eliminate them. The rational fears we want to properly control and direct. But both kinds of fears belong under the lordship of our God and are related to him. He says, “I am a shield to you. Do not fear.” And if we trust God - we won’t let fear control us.

Shields serve what purpose? They protect against an assault don’t they? You probably picture a small, round, piece of metal used in ancient wars to deflect arrows and swords. Or maybe you think of an invisible shield, such as they had on Star Trek. You could never see those shields run by the Enterprise, but they were always getting partially eliminated by enemy assaults weren’t they? You can just hear Scotty or Worf nervously announcing that the shields are at 24%. It made for good drama I guess. When the shields were down, Kirk and Picard always knew they were in trouble, they were vulnerable and things got tense and anxious. But if God is your shield then you have a place to turn when you are anxious. You can weather the assaults of the Romulans and the Elamites and the demons without a worry. God always functions at full capacity. Many times in Scripture the Lord reminds us of this role he has in our lives. Psalm 33:**20** *Our soul waits for the Lord; He is our help and our shield.* Psalm 84:**11a** *the Lord God is a sun and shield.* Psalm 115:**9-11** (NLT) *O Israel, trust the Lord! He is your helper and your shield. 10 O priests, descendants of Aaron, trust the Lord! He is your helper and your shield. 11 All you who fear the Lord, trust the Lord! He is your helper and your shield.* Other terms are used to communicate the very same idea. In the New Testament we get the promise of Christ that he will be there for us in our moments of deepest need. I love the word he spoke to Peter. In Luke 22:**31** (ESV) *Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat.* Satan is a pretty powerful foe. And the Lord says that he was targeting Peter. Peter was on the devil’s short list and that would be a scary thing to know if you didn’t get the rest of the story. The rest of the story comes in the next verse **31-32** *Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, 32 but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”* There is comfort for us in that. When the Lord calls us into battle and we are tempted to fear

there is the reminder that Jesus is with us, He is also at the right hand of God praying for us, and the Lord our God is our strength and shield. David said in Psalm 27:1*The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defense of my life; Whom shall I dread? 3 Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.* Knowing David he was probably saying this to himself to boost his own faith. How about you? When you are in trouble, can you remind yourself that God is our shield and defender? In that confession we move out boldly by faith in Him who says to us as he did to Abram, “I am a shield to you.”

Next we see here in Genesis 15:1 that our God is our reward. ® He says, “I am your shield and your very great reward.” What had just happened prior to God saying this? Just before this, in chapter 14, Abram had returned home from a military victory loaded with the spoils of war, which he did not keep for himself. Military victors in Abram’s day would either keep the spoils of war, or hand them over to their king, who would then reward the conquering general. Abram got neither. Because of his principles he walked home from battle and all he had that he didn’t have before was some enemies. God addresses the enemies under our first heading, and now he addresses the reward part. It is a very unusual reward - it is God himself. Now, when a person is your reward the understanding is that this person now belongs to you, either as slave or bride, or parent or friend. For the Almighty God to belong to you, to be your possession it has to be in that gracious relationship he maintains to his creatures as their friend. In James chapter 2, quoting from our text it says 23 (ESV) *the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God.* In Isaiah 41:8 God speaks of Abraham as his friend. The reward then described is a friendship with the Almighty. At this point I find myself at a loss to know how to communicate the nature of this reward to anyone who has not experienced it firsthand. To you who do not know God this must be very perplexing. It is my joy to tell you that, according to the Bible, real life, the essence of life as God intended it is to be in a relationship or friendship with our Creator. We sing songs to God that say, “Knowing You, there is no greater thing.” We sing, “Riches I heed not nor man’s empty praise. Thou mine inheritance now and always. Thou and Thou only first in my heart, High King of heaven my treasure thou art.” We have come to believe both by our experience and by the Scripture that the most wonderful thing in the world is to enjoy intimacy with God. Material wealth and family joys and popularity are all nice things, but are not worthy to be

compared with the reward of God Himself. I think of what the Lord said to the tribe of Levi when they were distributing the promised land among the tribes of Israel. Numbers 18. God had said, “This portion goes to Zebulun, this portion to Benjamin, and so on.” When He comes to the tribe of Levi, represented here by their leader, Aaron, he says this Numbers 18:20 *Then the Lord said to Aaron, “You shall have no inheritance in their land nor own any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the sons of Israel.* Why did God say that? Because the descendants of Aaron, the Levites, were to be his priests. They didn’t get their own land, but they got the privilege of greater proximity to the glory of God. How does that compare to property? Speaking Scripturally it is better than anything. In the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians the apostle Paul talks about the respect and the honor and the standing that was his in Israel and then remarks in this way Philippians 3:7-8 *But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.* What Abraham knew and Moses knew and David knew and Paul knew is that knowing God is the greatest thing in the world. I love the language of the King James Version for our text. There God says, “I am Thy shield and Thy exceeding great reward.” I struggle for words to express it. Dear friend, if you don’t understand this matter of knowing God, having a relationship to Him, relating to Him as a friend and a father, you are tragically missing out. And I appeal to you to look to Christ, turn from sin, trust in all you know of Jesus now and seek to learn more of Him that He might become your exceeding great reward. And because this reward is a relationship it is not a static thing, but a dynamic one. It ebbs and flows and grows. It becomes more and more sweet and intimate. That is what its all about when we sing a song like “All I want is more of you.” Or “draw me near to where you are.” We have come to know Him and long to know him more. He is our exceeding great reward. And there is nothing in this world to rival that.

Our third consideration this morning is that God is a Promise Keeper. Some you men here regard yourself as Promise Keeper, but God is the original Promise Keeper. Most of our passage is about this. And here God makes two promises to Abraham. One he had made before. The new, or at least, more specific promise to Abraham was that his original heir would come from his own body, i.e. be his biological child. In verse 2 we find Abraham sort of wondering aloud in the presence of God. 2-3 *But Abram said, “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.”

Back in chapter 13 God had told Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust particles of the earth. Abram is having a hard time with that promise. He is figuring that his hope for a child is about shot and he’s wondering if he needs to reinterpret God’s promise somehow. He is honest with God here and expresses a bit of distress over not having a real child as an heir. What Abram is doing is okay. There is nothing wrong with the question. If God has promised you a victory and you are down by 20 points in the fourth quarter its okay to ask God whether He’s going to do a miracle or if you need some insight as to the meaning of the promise. That is all Abram is doing here. Many of our great biblical heroes had this exact kind of conversation with God, in which they wonder out loud about how God is going to make it work. God told Moses to go speak to Pharaoh. What did Moses say? “But Lord, I don’t speak so good.” He also objected that nobody in Israel would believe his claims. God spoke to both those concerns of Moses. When the Lord called Jeremiah to be his prophet what did Jeremiah say, “Lord, aren’t I a little young for this job?” When the angel told Mary she would have a son what did Mary say? She didn’t just say, “Oh sure, cool, God can do anything.” No, Mary said, “How can this be since I am a virgin?” It was a fair question and the Lord was happy to answer it. God wants us to trust Him but he doesn’t get upset when we wonder aloud about how he is going to manage to keep his promises.

Here Abram is conjecturing that maybe God is going to give him descendants thru this Eliezer fellow who would have been the replacement, default heir, if Abram had never had a son. Eliezer is likely the son of Abram’s leading servant, his chief steward. He was born into the household under Abram’s jurisdiction, but he was hardly the same as a real son. So, the Lord responds to Abram’s question and let’s him know that a miracle of sorts is on the way. 4 *Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.”* So, God says your heir will be your son.

The second thing God says is that your descendants will be vast in number. I am told that a holocaust survivor, Yitta Schwarz, decided to repopulate the world with Jewish offspring and gave birth to 15 children, each of whom had more than ten children of their own so that by the time Yitta died at 93 her family was nearly 2,000 in number. Can you imagine? That’s an average of more than five birthdays each day. But -- childless Abram, before its over, will have

the largest family in history. In telling him about it God decided to use a visual aid. For you who teach there is something to learn here. Visual aids do make an impact. (show stars) 5 *He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."* God takes his student out of doors and tells him to look up. That in itself is therapeutic. The upward glance often brings a perspective you just can't get by looking around. Abram had been looking around for ways to solve problems; he had been looking at himself and his own resources, the Lord says, "Look up." ® The answer is in the heavens. Someone said, "When the outlook is bleak try the uplook." ® I know when I look up, especially at night, I am reminded of the vastness of the universe and therefore too of the infinite power of the God who made it all. In comparison, my problems don't seem so large. Now, something else you see when you look up, besides vastness is stars. Stars in Abrams time and place meant more than they do to us. We watch TV stars at night. They watched real stars and in remote locations with no artificial lighting the stars are far more vivid and appear more numerous as well. In our electronic society we hardly ever really stop to look at the stars. In college I took an astronomy class. Our first assignment was to draw the night sky with all the stars. This was kind of bizarre. I found a field and I laid down in it and, woah, there are a lot of stars up there. I began to draw the sky and after a few minutes I was hopelessly disoriented. The latest guess of our scientists is that there are 100 billion stars in our galaxy and there are 10 trillion galaxies. That means there may be 100 octillion stars, which is a number with 29 zeroes. Imagine that if you can. God is saying, "So shall your descendants be." Before he had compared Abram's offspring to the dust in number. 13:**16** *I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered.* This is one incredible, fantastic, promise. And whether he looked down at dust or up at the stars Abraham would be reminded of what God had promised.

But has God, will God, really keep such a promise? I'm not going to argue that the comparisons to the stars and the dust have to be taken literally. To do so would require that human history continue a great deal longer. We would have to wait until we had 100 octillion or so children of Abraham. That doesn't seem the way to go or to think. But the kind of numbers described here do not seem appropriate if all we are describing are the biological descendants of Abraham, if all we are describing are the humans who are Jewish by race.

Properly understood the descendants of Abraham include many more than that. When we get to chapter 17 we will find that Abram is appointed as a father of many nations, not just the Jewish nation, but many nations. Genesis 17:4 (NLT) *This is my covenant with you: I will make you the father of a multitude of nations!* How does that work? When did that happen? There is only one way to understand that and the New Testament gives it to us. Who are the promised descendants of Abraham that form such a multitude? Galatians 3:7 (ESV) *Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. **29** if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.* Who makes up this great number of descendants from Abraham? We do! Father Abraham had many sons and I am one of them, and if you believe in Jesus you are too. We are part of the promise. You were one of those stars Abraham saw on that night so many years ago. How many such children of Abraham will there be? Revelation 7:9-10 (NLT) *After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. **10** And they were shouting with a great roar, "Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!"*

The population of heaven, every one of which follows in the faith of Abraham, will make up a multitude which no one can count. To Abraham, the childless old man, this would have seemed hugely preposterous but our God is an awesome God, a faithful God and His promises will never fail. Every time you look at the stars remember, God is faithful. Every time you look at the sands of the seashore or the dust of the ground remember, God is faithful. Every time you start to worry and wonder if there is any way for God to come through in your life, remember God is faithful.

And one other thing. Remember to share the good news about our Lord Jesus with others. I'm encouraged by this story to know that God is still about the business of keeping his promise to Abraham. He is still adding to the number of his descendants. That means that when you talk to someone outside the faith you don't know if he or she is a non-Christian or a pre-Christian. A lot of you thought at one time that you were a non-Christian when, in fact, you were just pre-Christians. There are a lot of pre-Christians out there masquerading as unbelievers and we need to unmask them, graciously. My point is that nobody is born into Abraham's family, you have to be reborn into it. So, when you see someone living without reference to God don't let that dissuade you from speaking about Christ. That sin-tattered soul may be a star in the making.

And if you just share a testimony, a word about Christ, an invitation to church you may have the inestimable privilege of sharing in the birth of a star, and another son or daughter of Abraham who will join one day that numberless throng to shout, *Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!*