

# Genesis 15:1-21 // Faith vs Fear

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[0:00] Tonight's reading is Genesis 15, which you can find on page 15 of the Church Bibles.

It doesn't happen often that way, does it? So if you can turn to page 15, and we're reading Genesis 15. 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. 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?

And Abram said, You've given me no children, so a servant in my household will be my heir. 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.

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

[1:21] Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. 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.

But Abram said, Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it? 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.

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

As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the Lord said to him, Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated there.

But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age.

[2:53] In the fourth generation, your descendants will come back here. For the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, Kabmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Gergashites, and Jebusites.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thanks for that, Rob.

Good evening, everyone. If we've not met, my name's Azariah. I'm one of the ministry trainees here at St. Silas. Let me add my welcome to DG's this evening. It's a privilege to be here with you as we hear from God through his word together.

As has been mentioned a couple of times, it's our regular practice at St. Silas to preach through books, so we're continuing our series in Genesis. We want God's word to be the authority, so it'll be really helpful for me, and even more helpful for you, if you can keep your Bibles open to Genesis 15, which we found out is helpfully on page 15, and making sure that what I say lines up with what it says.

[4:30] Let's pray as we come to God's word now. Heavenly Father, these are your words to us.

We pray that you would help us to understand them. We pray that you would speak to us through them. We pray that from them we would learn to know you better and to love you more.

In Jesus' name. Amen. I want to start with a question. What do you have faith in? What do you put your trust in?

What is the one thing that you're building everything else in your life on? Is it a good job? Some financial stability?

Is it good relationships with friends and family? Maybe starting a family of your own one day?

Maybe it's finding your purpose in life, your identity, your destiny.

[5 : 28] No matter what you put your faith in, we all have times when we start to wonder if it's really as reliable as we thought it was. Maybe you lose your job.

A relationship breaks down. You'll start to wonder if you ever know what your purpose in life is or who you are. Or maybe even you get what you thought you wanted all along and it just doesn't live up to the trust that you put in it.

As Christians, we put our trust in God. Or at least we try to. We trust that this life here isn't all there is.

That we were created to worship God, to enjoy Him forever. And if we believe that that is our eternal destiny, it makes sense to live our lives here and now differently.

But putting your trust in something that you can't see the fulfillment of can be really hard. And this is exactly the situation that we find Abram in at the start of this passage tonight.

[6 : 34] He has followed God faithfully, away from his family, from his homeland, and from all that's familiar. And he's living as a traveling herdsman in tents in a foreign land.

And things have been going well. God has made incredible promises to him to make his descendants a great nation who will live in the land that he's come to. But Abram also has good reasons to fear and to doubt these promises.

He's still childless. He's still living in a tent as a foreigner. And now he has powerful enemies in the land around him who could wipe him out at any time.

So we begin at verse 1. First heading on the service sheets, if you've got them with you and you want to follow along. Fear versus faith in God's promises.

Verse 1 begins with the words, After this. After what? If you were here last week, you'll know. If you weren't, let me try and summarize for you quickly. Chapter 14, which we looked at last week.

[7 : 45] Abram makes enemies. A group of kings had gone to war. And the king of Sodom, along with his dodgy mates, had been soundly defeated. Abram's nephew Lot had been kidnapped from Sodom as part of the victory spoils.

So Abram took his household guards to rescue him and the rest of the people who were taken.

They attacked by night and retrieved all the people and goods that were stolen. And that's one way to make a group of kings quite annoyed at you.

And then when the king of Sodom comes to him after the battle, Abram refuses any reward or payment. Instead, he says, in effect, I don't want anything to do with you or your dodgy mates.

That's another way to make another group of kings quite mad at you. Imagine going to sleep in a tent in the middle of the desert each night, wondering if you might wake up to an army tearing their way through your encampment.

So after this, verse 1, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. Do not be afraid, Abram.

[8 : 54] I am your shield, your very great reward. God promises to protect Abram from the enemies he's surrounded by and to reward him for his faithful dependence on God instead of throwing his lot in with the violent kings around him.

But Abram has a question. In verse 2, he asks, Sovereign Lord, what can you give me? Since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my state is Eliezer of Damascus.

And Abram said, you've given me no children. So a servant in my household will be my heir. When we're first introduced to Abram and his wife Sarai at the end of Genesis chapter 11, one of the first things we learn about them is that they're unable to have children.

But God promised them descendants. The whole point of coming to this distant land in the middle of nowhere was that his offspring would one day inherit it.

We can almost feel Abram's anguish as he asks this question. Here I am, where you've brought me. A world away from my family, my homeland. I'll never see them again.

[10 : 03] Enemies on every side. Will all of this have been for nothing when I die? Why bring me all the way out here if the person who inherits it all when I'm gone is from Damascus just up the road?

What about your promise? Verse 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.

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.

What a promise. Not only will God give him children, but his descendants will be as numerous as the stars. And not the sort of five or six you might see if you're lucky in Glasgow on the three clear nights we get each year.

But the stars in the desert sky in the dead of night. Thousands upon thousands. So verse 6. Abram believes the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.

[11 : 14] Abraham believed. Great. He's got a promise. He can trust. In the face of his fear. Pretty straightforward. And it was credited to him as righteousness.

What's going on there? We see here for the first time one of the great truths of how God relates to all of his people. Christians aren't Christians because we're better than anyone else.

You get to know enough of us, you'll work that out. You don't become a Christian by signing up to follow a set of rules. Or by completing some sort of self-improvement regime. Or by being a nice enough person to qualify.

God is perfect. We can't be good enough to impress him. Or to earn what he promises us. All we can do is trust that he will give us what he has promised.

We also get a little bit of foreshadowing here of the greatness of God's promise to Abraham of descendants. Abraham's descendants aren't just the people who will share his genes.

[12 : 21] But everyone who trusts in God's promises the same way that he does. Now if that sounds like a little bit of a logical jump. It is. It's a jump that kind of catches the whole story of the Bible and jumps to the end.

So let's not take my word for it. Let's quickly turn together to Romans chapter 4. Which is on page 1131. Of the Bibles you have with you there.

Paul wrote this letter to a church with a mix of Abraham's descendants and outsiders. To explain how the outsiders, the Gentiles, were brought into these promises.

Let's read from verse 16 where he says, Therefore the promise comes by faith. So that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring.

God changes his name to Abraham later. Spoiler alert. Not only to those who are of the law. That is the Old Testament Israelites and the Jews of Paul's day. But also to those who have the faith of Abraham.

[13 : 23] He is the father of us all. As it is written. I have made you a father of many nations. We jump over the page to verse 23.

Verse 22. This is why it was credited to him as righteousness. The words it was credited to him. Which we just read in Genesis 15. Were written not for him alone.

But also for us. To whom God will credit righteousness. For us who believe in him. Who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. You become a Christian by believing God's promises.

Just like Abraham did. Specifically God's promise that all who trust in Jesus as their saviour and king. Will have his perfect righteousness credited to them.

Because God is not only perfectly righteous. He's perfectly just. He can't just ignore the wrong things that we do. And the ways we've rebelled against him.

[14 : 26] And harmed one another. Someone has to pay the penalty. For Abraham's sin. And for ours. We'll come back to that soon. So jumping back to Genesis 15.

We're six verses in. We've got a great little message. Abraham is afraid. God reassures him with an incredible promise. And Abraham believes him. Which God counts to him as righteousness.

Same thing is true for us. As Martin would say. Joy. Problem solved. Animals safe. A ten-ish minute sermon. Vegan friendly.

Let's go. Not quiet. What is going on in these next 15 verses? Why are they here? And at this point it's really going to help us.

To think about not just who Genesis is written about. But who it's written for. The book of Genesis is written for Abraham's descendants. Right on the edge of returning to the land.

[15 : 28] That God promised to Abraham. After hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt. There are a whole nation's worth of them. They can look around. And see.

That Abraham's belief. In God's promise of descendants. Was well founded. However. They're also in a frightening situation.

They're about to return to the land. To take possession of it. But first. They have to defeat the violent descendants. Of the kings Abraham defeated. That live there now. These were nations built. On the worship of idols. Violence. And oppression. So they are about to find out.

If God is going to be faithful. To the second part of his promise to Abraham. The promise to give his descendants. This land. They're facing their own moment of crisis.

[16 : 24] Will they trust. God's promises. With them in mind. Let's look at the next part of this chapter. Under the second heading on your sheets. Doubt.

Versus faith in God's covenant. Verse 7. He. That is God. 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. But Abraham said. Sovereign Lord. How can I know. That I will gain possession of it. This is a different kind of question from before.

Previously. Abraham was asking for a child of his own. If God fulfills that promise. Abraham will see it. However. With the promise of land. Abraham knows.

That this is a promise for his descendants. In the distant future. He is asking God for a guarantee. That will give him confidence. In something beyond his earthly life.

[17 : 22] And this time. We don't just get another promise. We get a covenant. A covenant is like the ancient. Near Eastern equivalent of a contract. To confirm the covenant.

To sort of sign on the dotted line. You would take animals. Cut them in two. And then walk between the pieces. As a way of saying. May I become like these animals.

If I don't fulfill my vows. The literal translation of. Made a covenant. In verse 18 of Genesis 15. Is to cut a covenant.

It's a ceremony. That feels really foreign to us. But one that Abraham. And his descendants. Would have recognized. As a binding agreement. It's scary enough for us today.

To sign for a loan. Or a mortgage. Imagine if after doing that. You then had to walk through. A meat locker. In the basement of the bank. To promise them your life as well.

[18 : 23] Five years ago. My wife Abby and I. Made a covenant. We made promises to one another. Before God. In front of our friends. And family. We even signed a contract. And got the government involved.

But even then. Abby didn't say. If you stop being my other half. I'll have your other half. As far as commitments go. This covenant ceremony.

Is as serious. As it gets. So in verses 9 to 11. Abram prepares. According to God's instructions. He takes the animals. He cuts them in two.

And he arranges the halves. Opposite each other. He drives away the birds. That would defile the carcasses. Which could call the legitimacy. Of the ceremony into doubt.

And he waits for God. Now normally at this point. Both parties would make their promises. And then they would both. Walk through the animals. To show their commitment. But instead.

[19 : 21] Abram falls asleep. Verse 13. Then the Lord said to him. Know for certain. That for 400 years. Your descendants will be strangers.

In a country not their own. And that they will be enslaved. And mistreated there. But I will punish the nation. They serve as slaves. And afterward. They will come out.

With great possessions. You however. Will go to your ancestors. In peace. And be buried. At a good old age. In the fourth generation.

Your descendants. Will come back here. For the sin of the Amorites. Has not yet reached. Its full measure. God. So imagine. You're a descendant. Of Abram.

Standing on the edge. Of the promised land. Hundreds of years later. Being reminded. That God knew. Exactly. What you would go through. And was preparing.

[20 : 16] To bring you back. At the perfect time. God has promised. To be with you. To use you. As instruments. Of justice. And restoration. So that instead.

Of the destructive. Violent. Idolatrous. Influence. Of the Canaanite nations. Israel. Instead. Can shine. As a light. To all nations. And be a source.

Of blessing. To the whole world. And then. In verse 17. After making this vow. God himself. Passes. Between the pieces. Appearing. As a smoking fire pot. And a flaming torch. This. Would have been. Exactly. What Abram's descendants.

Expected to see God. Appear as. A pillar of smoke. That led them by day. And a pillar of fire. That led them by night. And all of this happens.

[21:14] While Abram sleeps. Abram makes no vows. And he doesn't pass. Between the animals. Then. God makes his final vow.

Of the covenant. Verse 18. On that day. The Lord. Made a covenant. With Abram. And said. To your descendants. I give this land. From the wadi of Egypt. To the great river. The Euphrates. God makes the promises. God takes on the penalty. If these promises. Don't come to pass. And Abram.

Does. Nothing. God's covenant vow. Is. I will rescue your descendants. From slavery. And bring them back here. I will bring justice.

To those who enslaved them. And I will use them. To bring justice. To the nations. That have polluted the land. With their violence. And idolatry. And I will do this.

[22:09] Once the sin. Of these nations. Has fully earned. The punishment. I will bring upon them. And if this promise fails. I will take on.

The penalty of death. Regardless of who. Is at fault. And it happened. Abram's descendants. Entered the land. God gave them victory. Over their enemies. And they filled it. And prospered. But over many long years. Time and time again. They became just as bad.

As the nations. They'd driven out. God. In his justice. And righteousness. Couldn't simply. Allow them. To enjoy his blessing. Even as they polluted.

The land he'd given them. With the same. Violence. And idolatry. The Amorites had. He warned them. I am the Lord. Your God. You must not do.

[23:04] As they do in Egypt. Where you used to live. You must not do. As they do. In the land of Canaan. Where I'm bringing you. If you defile. The land. It will vomit you out.

As it vomited out. The nations. That were there. Before you. God promised. To make Abram. A great nation. So that all the peoples. On the earth. Could be blessed.

Through him. But his descendants. Became a curse. And they were exiled. From the land. But God. Had walked through. The animals. He'd vowed.

To pay the penalty. For covenant breaking. No matter. Who was at fault. And he did this. Knowing full well. That that covenant penalty. Would need to be paid.

And pay it. He did. When God. The son. Jesus. Was put to death. On a Roman cross. Bearing the penalty. For covenant breaking.

[24:00] Not just for Israel. But for the whole world. And receiving the punishment. For our rebellion. That God's justice. Demanded. And so.

To conclude. You and I. Here today. Are in a similar situation. To those Israelites. Genesis was written for. The promises. That God made to Abram.

Have been extended to us. As we read in Romans. Like the Israelites. So long ago. We can look around us. And see just how greatly. God has fulfilled. His promise.

The Christians. In this room. In Glasgow. In the world. Are evidence. Of God's faithfulness. To a childless man. That his descendants. Would outnumber the stars.

That he would be the father. Of many nations. But like them. God's promises to us. Aren't yet complete. We don't yet see. Our promised eternal home.

[24:58] So. Like them. We have a new covenant. To give us confidence. That all who put their trust. In Jesus. Would be counted righteous.

Those who have the faith. Of Abraham. Will receive. An even greater blessing. Than he had been promised. They will have. An eternal home. In glory. They will be rescued.

Not from slavery. In Egypt. But from slavery. To sin. And death. This is the covenant. We can look to. When we doubt. God's commitment. To the promises. To us.

He made this covenant. In the costliest way. He could. All we need to do. Is trust him. To be. So if you're here tonight. And you've put your faith.

In Jesus. Have confidence. We serve. A covenant. Making God. He loved. Abram. Enough. To come from heaven. To earth. To walk through.

[25:57] Blood soaked. Dirt. In the Middle Eastern desert. To show his commitment. To his promises. He loved. Us enough. To send. His own son. To die.

To pay the cost. For our sin. For our rejection. Of him. And to welcome us back. And if you're here tonight. Looking in. On the Christian faith.

