

Series: "Genesis: The Beginning Continued"

Sermon: "Believing God's Covenant in Dreadful Darkness"

Text: Genesis 15

RGJ/R/FBCCS/ 5-23-21 **UNEDITED**

- Back at the turn of the century, Dr Dallas Willard gave a speech in which he warned, "*Truth is in trouble.*" From there he went on to say, "*When we lose truth, there's nothing left but conformity.*"
- Now, twenty years later, so-called "cancel-culture" is just one example of how right Willard was. Some people "*cancel*" others if they will not *conform* to what they hold as *their personal truth*.
- When shared truth is no longer the foundation of what we believe together, we are motivated to expect others to conform to what we believe. What we believe personally, what is sometimes called "**my** truth" becomes what we call "**the** truth."
- All of this should sound vaguely familiar if you are listening at all to the academy, philosophy or politics in our day.
- With a simple illustration, in the same speech, Willard reminds us of what happens when "my truth" becomes "the truth."
- "*Imagine a group of people out in a forest, lost, and all of them have compasses but their compasses all point in different directions. Now can you imagine one saying to the other, "Well, I'll respect your compass if you'll respect mine. That's not exactly going to get you out of the woods. It is so important to realize that what we accept as truth is going to determine our action and that the finding of the truth is not just sort of a 'nice' thing."* (Dallas Willard; 1999: "Truth: Can We Do Without It?")
- *Genesis 15* is one of those pivotal chapters of Scripture. In it a God definitively and with divine gusto made a covenant with Abram that impacted his life, the life of Israel in the past, the life of Israel today and the life of Israel eschatologically in the days to come.
- In other words, chapter 15 contains vivid promises of God that shape the entirety of human history by their part in the eternal redemptive plan of God.

Series: "Genesis: The Beginning Continued"

Sermon: "Believing God's Covenant in Dreadful Darkness"

Text: Genesis 15

RGGJR/FBCCS/ 5-23-21 **UNEDITED**

- We have seen aspects of these promises—parts of this chapter 15 covenant already but here, Moses pictures the core of the relationship between Abram and God. I would say, by pattern—by example—Moses pictures the core of the relationship between God and God's people throughout all of human history.
- **God speaks.** Sometimes he does it very dramatically and with great visible exclamation points as he does here but not always. In fact most often there are no fiery ovens and torches—no birds to fight off—no animals split in half as here when God speaks. For us, by far, most often, God speaks through the living fire of his Word-Scripture.
- **God Speaks God's truth. Humans make a choice.** Will we trust what God says is truth or trust something else that denies it what God says is truth?
- Sometimes humans deny what God says is truth in rebellious, ambitiously autonomous ways—they out right claim God is flat out wrong.
- Other times, humans deny what God says is true by "shading" what he says just a bit—correcting it a little—making it align more with what they feel should be the truth—or want to be the truth.
- Christians tend to go this "coloring of God's truth" route more often although some who claim to be following Christ have become more and more emboldened these days not just to twist God's truth a bit but rather to out right reject it as the world often does.
- To paraphrase Dallas Willard, *"When we Christians lose God's truth in Scripture, there is nothing left but trying to force conformity to our own personal truth or even to the truth of the world."*
- *Genesis 15* has many theological implications particularly when one considers the NT contexts that connect with it. However, the immediate message of *Genesis 15* is that God speaks truth so God is

trustworthy. Abram believes the trustworthy—Abram places his faith in the One trustworthy God and that is, the most important **RIGHT** thing any human can do. "**Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD credited that to him as righteousness.**"

- Those words are actually the center, highlighted pivot point of the whole chapter. Look at them there in *Genesis* 15, verse 6.
- **READ Genesis 15:6**
- The editors of my single-column, 1984 edition of the NIV translation, separate that one line of verse 6 from what comes before in 1-5 and what comes after in 7-20. They even leave untranslated into English a potential "and" that would have made us English readers much more likely to assume verse six is meant to tell us the result of verses 1-5 rather than stand more by itself as a highlighted idea Moses wants the reader to see clearly. I agree that the grammar and syntax of the Hebrew supports this separation.
- Verse 6 is not emphasizing the result of 1-5, it is a declaration that Abram was a believer in God's truth. He believed what God had told him all along was truth and thus, God was trustworthy. This belief was counted as righteousness for Abram by God.
- **The human believer trusting the truth spoken by the trustworthy God is righteousness to God.**
- There is great depth to all that this verse 6 with its **faith-righteousness** for Abram might mean theologically. We could consider what Jesus said to some Jewish opposers in *John* chapter 8 beginning at verse 48. Let me read you a portion of that very interesting dialogue in which these Jews accuse Jesus of being demon-possessed to which he replies with a truth that is even more disruptive of their personal, own truth to which he was supposed to conform. **READ John 8: 48-59**

Series: "Genesis: The Beginning Continued"

Sermon: "Believing God's Covenant in Dreadful Darkness"

Text: Genesis 15

RGGJR/FBCCS/ 5-23-21 **UNEDITED**

- Now, that passage is another very deep theological gold mine! We could dig in our thinking to ask about how the Logos, the 2nd person of the Trinity, the Son of God, Jesus the Christ across time was the one in whom Abram rejoiced to see his day. Was it specifically Jesus or was it more generally God's Messiah that Abram saw?
- We know something else from a beautiful statement in *Hebrews 11: 10* that we have looked at more than once already that Abram knew enough to not make this world, as it is, his home. That writer tells us, **"For he was looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God."**
- Did Abram have some revelation we don't know about that showed him the end times when God's city would come down to earth and Jesus the Christ would reign? We don't know because we are not told.
- So, again, just as I enjoyed talking about mysterious, UFO King Melchizedek last week, I enjoy talking about the possible ramifications of what Moses writes in verse 6 here on *OT soteriology*—i.e., how OT people were saved and what they knew about it—but I don't think that was Moses' point in the context.
- I've put this out to you first so we don't stumble there when the verse and my sermon don't answer all the questions we would like to have answered and all the implications raised by what Jesus said in John and the author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote.
- In this time, the glorious message of verse 6 is that Abram was a human who believed God's truth and thus found God trustworthy and that this believing God was counted by God as righteous acting by a human.
- Now, let' read the two parts around this bold statement in the middle. **READ Genesis 15:1-6**

- So, after the battle and victory of chapter 14—after Abram had made it clear to the King of Sodom that he was allied with the God the humans of Sodom rejected—after Abram had refused to take worldly shortcuts to the promises of God even if they made life look a bit easier—after all of this comes—without us knowing how long after—comes the wonderful, mysterious powerful events of chapter 15.
- The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision. After checking, I believe this is the first time God has communicated to Abram in this way. In fact, over 75 years, I count that, we know of God only communicated with Abram 7 to 8 times in ways similar to this. Maybe Abram just had to keep trusting what God had already said to him over long periods in between these times of special revelation.
- So, maybe Abram is now a little shaky. We humans do get shaky in our faith sometimes.
- God with an "***I am***" statement rather than a statement that begins with "I will do" which is where we humans must start but that is another very long theological discussion. "*I am*" *what you need Abram!* Remember I am the shield that produced that victory in battle. And I am the reward that allowed you to refuse the tainted booty from the King of Sodom.
- ***I am who you need, not to be afraid, Abram. The what you think you need is relatively insignificant. If you have me, you don't need to fear the what!***
- But as a human like you and me, Abram said "***what!***" "What can you give me to make this work out the way I think you said you work going to work it out LORD? I am afraid that it (the what) is not!"
- Abram is looking down and seeing what he can see and his vision looking down is very limited.

Series: "Genesis: The Beginning Continued"

Sermon: "Believing God's Covenant in Dreadful Darkness"

Text: Genesis 15

RGGJR/FBCCS/ 5-23-21 **UNEDITED**

- Sadly, it seems some guy named Eliezer of Damascus, who is not even his son; just a guy in the right place at the right time, will be the one to carry on Abram's heritage. But he will not carry on his physical seed line which seems to be what God's Word to him had already promised and Abram had believed already. You recall the *"I'll make your offspring—you seed lineage—as numerous as the dust particles of the earth"* from chapter 13.
- But the WORD of the LORD clarifies. Your son will be you physical son. Your seed-line will be so prolific—look up! See those stars in the black sky of an ancient land unpolluted by lights being everywhere? That's how many Abram! That's how great my blessing will be on you on a man who believes my Word!
- And Moses writes in verse 6 that indeed this was the man Abram was. ***Abram was a man who believed God and that made him a righteous man whom God could bless in this starry-starry way.***
- Remember, the blessing is not a candy-like reward to cajole human behavior God wanted. The blessing is the empowerment of God for Abram to carryout his created, human purpose and God's plan for all of humanity
- God will bless some humans. He will bless them not because they have earned that blessing by behaving perfectly. We have seen Abram was an imperfect human. God will bless some humans whose righteousness and thus receptiveness for that empowering blessing is predicated on hearing and believing the WORD of the LORD—predicated on faith—predicated on trusting the trustworthiness of God.
- Before moving on, I should point out that believing God had not absolutely alleviated the possibility of Abram's human fear. And, that human fear did not absolutely exclude Abram from participating in

God's plan. I trust I am not twisting that to make my "own truth." I think that lesson is here but you'll need to validate it by searching the Scriptures—seeing what God's Word says.

- Let's look at the rest of the chapter. **READ Genesis 15:6-20**
- In the vision through which the WORD of the LORD came to Abram about his offspring, God also addressed Abram's concerns about a Promised Land to carry out the purpose of lifting up the NAME of the LORD.
- Again, Abram receives an "**I AM**" answer before he receives an "**I DO.**" **Start with who "I AM" and you'll be less fearful and concerned about how I will DO!"** ...Says God to Abram, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, me and to you.
- But God provides help when it is needed. He will emphasize—formalize—concretize his promise to Abram by participating in an interesting ceremony that likely was something Abram would have seen in other contexts in his day—**a covenant cutting ceremony.**
- You can enjoy tracking down all the possible meanings of the details of the symbolism. I have no doubt God wasted nothing in any detail Moses describes here. I won't try to talk about all of the potential meanings.
- It would be difficult to miss a **sacrificial** emphasis. All sorts of innocent animals give up their lives in the process of cutting this formal covenant.
- The picture of the two halves through which God will move seems likely to picture that God will bind all this together.
- Then look at verse 11. Why did we need to know that birds of prey tried to eat the meat that was laid out for the making of the covenant? When you look at other references for birds of prey, they

are sometimes used to symbolize the opposition to God's plan and people.

- That makes sense to me here. The humans who were living in ambitious autonomy without God—the great Deceiver who opposes God and his plan, would not want this formal covenant to be completed. There will be great opposition to this covenant going forward. Abram will realize that as he is chasing evil-representing birds away.
- Night comes. Abram is tired (maybe from chasing birds all day) and he falls asleep. But, it is not just a normal good night's sleep. The description in verse 12 is clear.
- God is going to make a promise. The evil forces of the world and beyond will oppose it. Abram and God's people who will receive the promise will experience some very dark and difficult living to see the promise come to pass.
- It will not be all unicorns and rainbows even when that is what they want—that is what they use their lives to achieve—that is what the false prophets tell them. It will many times be a dreadful and dark life of PROMISE for the sons of Abram.
- In fact, God says, those stars I showed you, your innumerable offspring—one experience they will have will be slavery and mistreatment in a foreign land. This particular darkness will be not for just a few years but for 400 years and all those generations.
- However, Abram, God. Promises, I will use even that darkness and pain for generations to accomplish my good, righteous plan.
- Then before the anesthesia wears off God tells Abram that he himself will not have that particular experience but will die with peace as an older man.

Series: *"Genesis: The Beginning Continued"*

Sermon: *"Believing God's Covenant in Dreadful Darkness"*

Text: *Genesis 15*

RGGJR/FBCCS/ 5-23-21 **UNEDITED**

- AND, here is the real up-lifter. After 4 generations your seed-line—your kids will be brought back to this PROMISED LAND because I will keep this covenant.
- AND, because God can certainly multi-task in keeping his plan going righteously and justly this 400 years your children suffer will be 400 years of of my patience mercy and grace on the autonomous God-rejectors that are now living in this PROMISED LAND
- Big theology here that bugs lots of folks! When God sent the generation first reading these words from Moses into the Promised Land with the command to destroy utterly the Canaanites who were there. that was not an angry impulse of God—that was not a capricious act.
- That was the culmination of a gracious call to repent and believe. This call was rejected by those humans living their ambitious-autonomy lives always rejecting the God for whom Abram had traveled the land and built altars in front of them. God had warned them and now their time had come.
- We may sometimes struggle with the generational aspects of all of this—both the slavery of the Israelites over generations and the destruction of the Canaanites over generations. However, God does not struggle working through years and generations righteously which would mean justly.
- The last few verses are as mysterious as a bush that burns but is not consumed as a man walking on water when he kept his eyes in the right place. But, they tell us something important about the covenant and living in the darkness.
- In that dreadful darkness, a smoking firepot and a blazing torch appear and pass through the pieces in effect joining the two sides in

a powerful and miraculous way. God is in the middle holding this together.

- There is some possibility that the firepot was a symbol in other covenants of the day. The torch is less likely or at least we don't know of it. In any case, these fire items were different than the ones imagined or used in any other covenant.
- In this covenant, only God passes through. It does not depend on the other party joining in the procession. This covenant depends only on God. This promise depends only on God. It will not fail.
- And, as God passes through, he brings HIS light into the dreadful darkness. His people—those who believe, will live in the dreadful darkness of a God-rejecting world with evil birds trying to destroy what God has promised—trying to prevent it from happening—but the God of fire, with all the light that he brings will always be therewith them in the middle of this promise holding it together and it's success only depends on his trustworthiness.
- Later to the generation entering the land, Moses makes God's promise explicit in Deuteronomy 31:6... ***"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."*** In dreadfully dark days, when birds of prey from the Evil One are attacking—be strong and courageous because God is there holding the parts of the promise together and he will not leave us or forsake us.
- If I made that sound more like an application to us than to the generation about to enter the promised land after the dark days of slavery and wandering in the desert, that's OK. I meant to do that because the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* does that in *Hebrews 13: 5 & 6* where he quotes from *Deuteronomy*, ***"God has***

Series: "Genesis: The Beginning Continued"

Sermon: "Believing God's Covenant in Dreadful Darkness"

Text: Genesis 15

RGGJR/FBCCS/ 5-23-21 *UNEDITED*

said, I will never leave you; never will I forsake you...and adds a quotation from Psalm 18: 6 and 7, ...So we say with confidence, The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

- The human who believes God's Word—the man or woman who accepts it as being valid and trustworthy is counted righteous and thus "**ble^ss-able**" by God to accomplish his purposes.
- No matter how dreadfully dark it gets while the promises unfold—no matter how many frightening birds of prey might swoop around trying to destroy the promises as time passes—this man or woman of **trust in the trustworthy God** can keep believing God's promises will ultimately be fulfilled--perfectly.
- This is a very important truth from God's WORD for his believing people of all ages. Why? Because God is very often working the **long-plan** across even generations to fulfill his promises to us. That can sometimes be frightening and confusing for us in the darker moments of our short lifetime.