

Sermon on Gen 15, Sept. 19, 2010

*Let us pray.*

**Gen 15:1-21**

<sup>1</sup> After this [Abram's meeting with Melchizedek and the King of Sodom], the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."

<sup>2</sup> 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?" <sup>3</sup> And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

<sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> 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." <sup>6</sup> Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

<sup>7</sup> 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."

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

<sup>9</sup> 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."

<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

<sup>12</sup> As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. <sup>15</sup> You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. <sup>16</sup> In the fourth generation your

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

<sup>17</sup> When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. <sup>18</sup> 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- <sup>19</sup> the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, <sup>20</sup> Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, <sup>21</sup> Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."

*This is the Word of the Lord.*

Last week in our children's Sunday school class we had a marvelous time looking at the story of Hannah from 1 Samuel 1. Hannah was the second wife of Elkanah, a righteous man who faithfully worshipped the Lord. Unlike Elkanah's other wife Peninnah, Hannah had not been able to have children, and Peninnah relentlessly mocked her for it. Year after year, Peninnah mocked Hannah, and Hannah would desperately pray to the Lord to be blessed with a child. Ultimately, the Lord answered "yes" to her cries, and she gave birth to the great prophet Samuel.

Even today Hannah's story is touching because we know the blessing that children are, and we also know that there are people who long to be parents, but are not. Even with the miracles that fertility science can bring, it is still up to the Lord whether a couple will be given the responsibility of parenthood. Even so, sometimes there is a quiet stigma, maybe in the form of curiosity or whispers, when a couple does not have children. Some people may wonder, "What's wrong with them, that they don't have kids?"

In Biblical times, for Hannah and even reaching back to the time of Abraham, not having children was a social disaster. Being barren was often seen to be a punishment from the Lord, and a cause for shame. In the case of Hannah, Eli the priest chided her for being drunk because her prayers were so impassioned, and she moved her lips without saying anything out loud. In this, Eli implied, "Maybe if you weren't soused up, the Lord would let you be a mother." In the case of Abram and Sara, there were probably people who said, "They must have some secret sin in their lives, to make the Lord close Sara's womb."

What we find in the beginning of Genesis 15 is precisely the puzzlement Abram felt. On top of that, God tells him that despite how astoundingly impossible it seemed, Abram will have an heir. At this point in history, a man could legally adopt someone to be his heir, but that was done only as a last resort. This explains Abram's reference to Eliezer of Damascus.

Another common alternative was for a barren woman to arrange for one of her maids to be a surrogate mother, and then legally adopt that child to be an heir. This explains why in the next chapter of Genesis Sara arranges for Hagar to lie with Abram. God promises Abram an heir, and Abram and Sara take things into their own hands by assuming that God's heir will come through Hagar's surrogacy. But the child who is born of this, Ishmael, is not the child God wants to be the rightful heir. Instead, Ishmael becomes the father of another nation, a nation that ends up being constantly at odds with Israel. Muslims have always claimed to be descended from Abraham through Ishmael, and that belief continues up to today.

So this is the background to Abraham's thoughts in Genesis 15. It completely befuddles him that God promises a naturally born son, despite the fact that he and Sara are quite old, despite the fact that it seemed one of his manservants would have to be his heir. And why was having an heir so important? Because a person's family line was tremendously important to his or her identity. This is partly why there are so many genealogies in the Old Testament. And a wealthy patriarch such as Abram would have been greatly concerned to see his lineage continue. If you think about the Jews in Jesus' time, many boasted in being able to trace their lineage to Abraham, to David, or to whatever tribe they belonged to. Even modern Jews stress how precious it is to have one's name live on through children and grandchildren.

There are two reasons I am spending a fair amount of time talking about the idea of heirs. The first one is that when we read the New Testament, the concept of adoption runs throughout its pages. In some instances the idea relates to Gentiles being adopted and incorporated into fellowship with Jews, and all of this because in Christ there is no longer any distinction between Jew or Gentile. Gentiles are not second-class Christians, and Jewish Christians are special, but no more special than Gentiles. All who trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior are equally precious members of the Body of Christ.

Elsewhere, the New Testament teaches that believers are adopted by God the Father. Jesus Christ is the only true Son of God. Because of His mediation and the salvation He achieved, those who place their trust in Him through faith are blessed to be called children of God. There are numerous references to this, but I'll read from Romans 9: "Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. <sup>7</sup>Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." <sup>8</sup>In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring."

So those who believe in Jesus Christ are adopted as God's true heirs, through the promise delivered to Abram. John 1 notes that Jesus as a Jew "came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup>Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— <sup>13</sup>children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

So this is the first reason I have talked so much about heirs. The second emphasis of Genesis 15 rests upon how integral faith must be in the lives of those who are the true heirs of God. As many of you have experienced, conceiving, bearing, and raising children is one of the most intimate, personal experiences a human being can have. The Lord asks Abram to trust Him about something that cuts to the very core of who he was as a man, a husband, and a human being. Many times the places where the Lord stretches and tests our faith are the areas where we are the most vulnerable. This is one of the reasons that being a devoted Christian is so difficult. If we are truly striving to be faithful, God won't let us rest in just giving him the parts of ourselves that are easy to turn over. He grows us by stretching us to give all of ourselves to Him, including our weakest parts, so He can make them strong according His perfect wisdom. /////

When we get to verse 7 in Genesis 15, the story seems to take a completely different direction by describing a bizarre scene with slaughtered animals and flying firepots. What God is actually doing for Abraham is sealing His promise of descendants with a common ritual of that time. God promises land because all of the

descendants Abraham will have will need a secure, spacious place to live. God shows Abraham that not only is His promise sure, but God has planned for every detail to care for Abraham's grandchildren centuries beyond.

So let's look at this ritual in detail, and then we'll consider what all of this means for us today. If you and I lived during the time of Abraham around 2100 BC, we would have used the ritual described here for making covenants, land agreements, and military treaties. Two parties would slaughter animals and spread them out with an aisle in between. The two would then walk side-by-side down the aisle, through the animal pieces, and this action would ratify the treaty or covenant. This was a very solemn religious occasion, because the animals used were the same ones used in sacrificial worship. So by taking part, each party in the agreement is saying, "If I fail to live up to my side of this covenant, may God do to me what we have done to these animals."

For a moment, contrast this with how covenants and agreements are often viewed today. Marriage covenants are frequently treated as disposable. Parents bring their children to be baptized, not because they wish to make a solemn covenant with the Lord, but because it's the thing to do, even if they have no intention of darkening a church door again. Pastors break covenants with churches, and churches break covenants with pastors. Vows are recited when people become church members, deacons, and elders, and sometimes forgotten soon afterward.

But God's words to Abraham are a stark reminder that when we as Christians take vows and make covenants, they are made in the presence of a God who is the ultimate covenant-keeper. We need to take our vows, and even everyday promises, as if we were reverently stating, "May what was done to these animals happen to me if I violate this covenant." This is why Jesus Himself teaches in Matthew 5, "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."

Even so, what's crucial about this scene with Abraham is that his role was only to prepare the ritual. God was the only one to pass among the slaughtered animals. Here's why this is significant: Abraham's role in the covenant was assigned to him by God, and he obeyed. In essence, his role was to trust and obey. There truly was no

way Abraham by himself could make God's promise of a descendants and a promised land come true. Only God was powerful enough to do that. So by passing through the animals, God takes upon Himself both Abraham's and His own role in keeping the covenant. It will be completely up to God for the natural child of Abraham to be born, and completely up to God to provide a promised land in which Abraham's countless descendants will live. In other words, Abraham's faith was what God asked of him, and he had to trust the Lord to take care of the rest. ////

Much has been written about the meaning of the smoking firepot and the torch in verse 17. Without a doubt they represent the presence and authority of God, but beyond that, their exact meaning is unclear. A firepot was a clay vessel used mainly for baking, and would have been part of the preparation of grain offerings for sacrifice to the Lord. The torch in Abraham's day was obviously used for light, but it also refers to military might, divine judgment, and purification by God. Any of these meanings would be appropriate.

Whatever meaning we opt for, God makes the purpose of the ritual clear in the last verses of the chapter. "On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, To your descendants I give this land." Not only has God vowed to give Abraham a child, He goes far beyond Abraham's imagination by blessing him with countless descendants. And on top of that, the nomadic Abraham will have children who one day settle in the land God promised. These last verses tell us that the land stretches from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates. The river of Egypt mentioned here is not the Nile, but a seasonal river in southwest Palestine that roughly divided Egypt from Canaan. What God assured Abraham of is a vast expanse of land given by the Lord to a vast number of people descended from his own bloodline.

Sometimes when I give the benediction, I read from the end of Ephesians 3: "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, <sup>21</sup>to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." All that Abraham asked for was an heir who was his own child. What did God give him? More than he asked for or imagined. Why did God give it to him? First, to accomplish

the Lord's work in the world. And second, because God loved Abraham, and Abraham trusted him, and was counted among the righteous.

How many times do we miss out on God's abundant blessing because we don't spend time with the Lord in prayer? In these chapters of Genesis, when Abraham has a worry or concern or something he's fretting about, what does he do? He prays to the Lord. He shares his heart with God. And God listens, and in His own good time, He blesses Abraham far beyond what he asked or imagined.

How many times do we miss out on God's blessings because we try to do things on our own? Abraham and Sarah made this mistake, and Ishmael was the result. The Israelites made this mistake over and over again. If we think God's isn't listening, or we don't like the way God is doing things, or if we think God is taking too long doing whatever He may be doing, we get mired down in doubt and convince ourselves that our way and our timing must be better than the Lord's. 2 Chronicles tells us what God's far better alternative is. God tells King Solomon: if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their sinful ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin, and will heal them."

This congregation faces many challenges. Some of the elders are concerned that there is not enough funding for this congregation to keep its covenant with me past this December. The congregation may have to choose between honoring its covenant with me, or repairing the front steps. No matter how serious or even impossible the challenges we face are, what does God ask us to do? Pray. Not just as individuals, but especially gathered together as God's people. When was the last time this congregation had regular prayer meetings?

Given the situation of this church, each and every one of you should be crying out to the Lord the way Hannah did. But it is imperative that you be united together in prayer groups, to tell the Lord your praises and concerns. Remember that Jesus said, <sup>18</sup>"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup>"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my

Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup>For where two or three come together in my name, there, am I with them."

If you want the Lord to bless you and this congregation beyond what you ask or imagine, then follow Abraham's example. The future of this congregation is not in your hands, and it is not in mine. It is in the Lord's hands. He can do exceedingly more than you ask or imagine, but that is the key. You, together as God's people, must ask Him. He is the only one who can accomplish what this congregation needs, but He will not do it unless you ask. Each and every one of you, alone and together in prayer groups, every day, every week. My prayer continues to be that you as a congregation will quickly become people of fervent, passionate prayer like Hannah and Abraham. This is God's promise: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their sinful ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal them."