

“God is Our Reward”

Genesis 15:1-21

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We have made the point in many ways in our examination of the first fourteen chapters of Genesis; the first book of the Bible, that these narratives are setting the table for all that is to come. The great trajectory of biblical history originates here in the account of the origin, fall, and early history of mankind, and, in particular, in the covenant that God made with Abram, or Abraham as he will soon be called. Everything that is to follow is the outworking of an understanding of God, man, and salvation that is introduced already at the very beginning of the Bible.

This explains why later in the Bible, so much attention is paid to this history, why it is so often appealed to in explanation of later developments, and why the Bible never corrects, never changes, never alters its theology, its understanding of reality, from what it was at the beginning. You don't have one message in Genesis and another in the Gospel of John. The writers of the New Testament to the man understood themselves to be building on the foundation laid down in the history recorded in Genesis. Genesis 15 is a particularly important demonstration of this fact. Statements in this chapter are cited or alluded to some 14 times in the New Testament and always to prove some important assertion that the New Testament writer -- Matthew or Luke, Paul or James -- was making.

Text Comment

- v.1 The opening statement connects what is about to happen to what has just happened. The word “shield,” is related in Hebrew to the verb “to deliver” which Melchizedek used in v. 20 of chapter 14. Now the Lord is saying what Melchizedek had said: it was he who gave Abram his great victory over the kings of the north. And because Abram was a faithful soldier of the Lord, the Lord will now give him a reward for his service. God's reward will take the place of the booty that Abram had turned down. And God's reward will be much greater! [Sarna, 112]
- v.2 Abram was complaining in a sense – the Lord had promised him an heir and no heir had appeared – but he was complaining in faith, not in unbelief, as is indicated by the fact that he addresses God as “sovereign Lord,” literally “Lord Yahweh.” [Waltke, 241]
- v.4 The “Behold” with which the verse begins is a literary device by which the narrator involves the audience in the action. He's inviting you to see what it is that he is describing.
- v.6 Verse 6 is a hugely important verse in the Bible. The Apostle Paul will refer to it at critical junctures in his demonstrations that we are forgiven, that we are put right with God *by faith* – by trusting in his promise -- and not by our own works or good behavior. In the context it is the author's evaluative viewpoint; his explanation of what had occurred. It organizes the material in the chapter. The Lord made a promise to Abram that he would have a son, and not just a son but a great host of descendants; Abram believed that promise in spite of his old age and that of his wife; the Lord considered him righteous because he had believed.

Then the Lord made him another promise: the land of Canaan. And remember, throughout the Bible Canaan is a prefiguration of heaven, and, as we read in Hebrews 11, *Abram knew that*.

- v.7 This is the typical language that begins ancient covenants: the identification of the king making the covenant – “I am so and so” -- and a brief prologue that describes the past dealings between the two parties. It is very like the introduction to the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20.
- v.11 Abram prepared the animals properly – the implication is that he understood what was coming – and then guarded the animals in preparation for what was to come.
- v.13 The dreadful and deep darkness that came over Abram in his sleep foreshadowed Israel’s misery in Egypt which the Lord said must precede their eventual possession of the Promised Land.
- v.14 You may remember how we read that when Israel left Egypt at the time of the exodus, the Egyptians loaded them down with gifts, so glad were they to be rid of them after suffering through the ten plagues.
- v.16 Here four generations is a synonym for 400 years. The Hebrew term is more flexible than its English equivalent. [Sarna, 116]

The promise to Abram would be fulfilled in keeping with God’s moral government of the world. The Lord is not indifferent to the fate of any human being and will always be just in his dealings with people, however rebellious they may have been against him. The fate of his own people will be intertwined with that of other human beings, even the most wicked of them. God will be patient with sinners, he will give them every opportunity to repent and believe, and often his own people must suffer because of that patience.

- v.17 This dramatic action is an oath on God's part. The smoke and fire represent the divine presence, as they will elsewhere in the Bible, and so it is the Lord himself who passed through the divided pieces of the animals. It is a form of self-imprecation known to have been used in ancient near eastern covenant-making ceremonies. In effect the Lord was saying, “May I be treated this way, may I be dismembered, if I do not keep the promise I have made.” This interpretation is confirmed in both Jeremiah 24 and in Hebrews 6 where we read that the Lord’s oath was meant to confirm to Abraham the certainty of the promise God had made. It is, of course, an act of condescension on God's part. Who is man to doubt the promises of God? But God stoops to help us believe nevertheless. [Sarna, 114-115]
- v.21 Interestingly, the boundaries of the land given here are far greater than those that Israel ever possessed, even at the height of her power under David and Solomon. This fact prepares the way for the growing understanding throughout the OT that the promise to Abram that God would make of him a great nation was a promise not only for the Jews but for the whole world.

In a day like ours, in which even many Christian people do not know the Bible well at all, comparatively few would be able to appreciate how fundamental to everything else that follows in Holy Scripture is the history recorded in Genesis 15. As more than one survey of American biblical literacy has found, we have become in a single generation a nation of biblical illiterates. That did not used to be the case. Americans knew the Bible quite well, but in a single generation that has ceased to be the case. With the Bible removed from the education children receive in school, with it largely invisible in the various media that Americans see and hear, and with ever fewer Americans reading the Bible for themselves, it should be no particular surprise that less than half of all adults can name the four gospels, that 60% of American adults cannot name even five of the Ten Commandments, that 50% of graduating high school seniors think that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife or that a considerable number of respondents in one survey thought that the Sermon on the Mount was preached by Billy Graham.

Understandably then we do not expect the ordinary American to know the history of Abram or to be able to account for chapter 15 as part of the unfolding message of the Bible. *But if anyone would understand the message of the Bible, he needs to begin here.* This chapter is about the covenant God made with Abram, the relationship that God defined with Abram with promises and corresponding obligations. We are explicitly told that that is what we are talking about in v. 18 of the chapter. Or, better, it is about the renewal of a covenant God had already made with Abram. The promises he made to Abram here were just those he had already made, though now with further elaboration. He had implicitly promised children to Abraham in chapter 12 and again in 13:16; here he made that promise more explicit and added detail. What is more he confirmed it with an oath. There is another, a third repetition or renewal of this covenant God made with Abram still to come in Gen. 17. God never tells us of his plans for us and for the world just once. The great message of the Word of God is repeated times without number. The Bible is a big book, but it has only a few great themes and these are repeated over and over in all manner of ways.

The subject of Genesis chapter 15 is such a central theme. Indeed, in a very real way, what we have here, organizes the rest of the Bible. *The rest of biblical history will record the fortunes of this covenant that God made with Abram.* That is, the history of salvation is the history of this covenant. All that follows is simply the unfolding, the working out, the elaborating, and the fulfilling of this covenant God made with Abram.

When we think of God's covenant with his people, we are more likely to think of Israel at Mt. Sinai, the giving of the law, Israel's entrance into the Promised Land, and so on. But all of that is nothing else but the working out of this original covenant with Abram, as our text, especially v. 7 and vv. 13-16 make clear. In Exodus 2:24 we are told specifically that God was moved to deliver the people of Israel from Egypt when they were suffering oppression in that foreign country because "he remembered his covenant with Abraham." And later in Exodus (6:3ff.) the Lord told Moses that he would deliver Israel from Egypt because of the promise he had made to Abraham. *Israel was Abram's progeny, the descendants of which we read here.*

The covenant God made with Israel at Sinai is never said to be a different covenant; it is simply the renewal and the amplification of the covenant God had long before made with Abraham. The promises of that first covenant: relationship with God, a multitude of descendants, and the land of Canaan, are exactly the promises that are central to the covenant that was later revealed to Moses.

Israel in bondage in Egypt, then in freedom at Sinai, wandering in the wilderness, and then taking possession of the Promised Land was always living in the covenant God made with Abram.

What is more, the covenant that God later made with the house of David, described in 2 Sam. 7, was also made in service of the covenant first made with Abram. It is a covenant that serves that first covenant, it supplies the means by which the promise God made to Abram would be fulfilled. The covenant God made with David promised an eternal heir to David's throne, a great king who would reign over God's kingdom forever. In Psalm 72, a Psalm written by Solomon about this promised King, this Messiah, we learn that "all nations will be blessed through him."

In other words, the great promise God, first made to Abram in Genesis 12, that all nations of the earth would be blessed through him, is now to be fulfilled through the life and reign of this coming King, who is, of course, Jesus Christ, called in the NT *the seed of Abram*. Which is why, when the birth of the Lord was announced, those to whom the announcement was made immediately saw in this coming birth the fulfillment of the covenant God made with Abram. In Luke 1:72-73, part of Zechariah's song, the *Benedictus*, we read,

“He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham...”

That is the very oath we have read here in Gen. 15. And Mary concluded her *Magnificat* similarly, in Luke 1:54-55:

“He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.”

Jesus Christ and his salvation is what God had in view in this covenant he made with Abram, the winning of the nations of the world to Christ, and the gathering of all the saints eventually in *the Promised Land*, heaven itself. All of that is what God was promising Abram here in Genesis 15, though Abram, of course, would not have known how all of it was to come to pass. At this point he would not have understood how his descendants would someday include people from every tongue, tribe, and nation, though he had already been told in chapter 12 that the whole world would be blessed through him. At this point he would not have understood precisely how the coming seed of the woman would save the world from sin and death, though he certainly knew of the promise of a seed who would crush the head of the serpent, a promise made already in Genesis chapter 3. Here we have not the details but the broad strokes, not a timeline but a paradigm or pattern for the history to come.

Any reader familiar with the Bible will recognize that some of the features explicitly emphasized here in Genesis 15 are fundamental to everything else we will read later in the Bible.

- I. *In the first place, in making a covenant, in forging a relationship with his people, it is God who takes the initiative.*

We've noticed this already, of course. It wasn't Noah who figured out that the world was to be destroyed because of its sin and that he needed to build an ark. God informed Noah and told him what to do. It wasn't Abram who sought God or decided that he could find him more easily in Canaan than in Ur of the Chaldees. Abram was an idolater happily living an idolater's life until God spoke to him and changed everything. When Abram took the initiative Sarah ended up in Pharaoh's harem and the Lord had to re-take the initiative to get her out of there and the two of them back to the Promised Land.

And here, again, it is God who speaks. "The word of the Lord came to Abram..." It was God who made the promise and God who devised the plan for the life of the world through the life of this man. It was all laid out ahead of time in the counsels of the Almighty: Abram would have a child in his old age; he would die, his descendants would go down to Egypt and live there for a long time, they would suffer oppression there, they would endure a long wait, then they would escape their bondage and finally take possession of Canaan. Abram knew nothing of any of this until God told him. All Abram did was trust the Lord to be true to his Word.

Throughout the Bible, in its historical narrative and its theological teaching, it is always this way: the Lord speaking to people, telling them of his plans for them, giving them his wonderful promises concerning salvation and the future, and assuring them that they can absolutely count on his promises being kept. What he asks of them is that they trust him and live accordingly.

In the New Testament that continues to be the case. No one contrived to bring the Lord Jesus from heaven: he was sent. No one imagined that he would die on the cross; only he knew that the cross was absolutely necessary if his people were to be saved. No one expected the resurrection, but God brought it to pass. And then we are told of troubles to come, of the need to remain steadfast in our confidence in the Word of God, of the long wait that will be required of us, and of the final consummation of salvation when Jesus comes again. *That is the Christian faith*, precisely what we find here already in Genesis 15. God making promises, his people trusting his word and waiting for those promises to come to pass.

It is always God first, God making a friend. It is no different if it was in Ur in 2,000 B.C. or is in Tacoma in A.D. 2015. It matters not whether God speaks in a vision or in sermon or out of the pages of a book or in a conversation with a Christian friend. The effect is the same, the message is the same, and the required trust in the Word of God is the same.

II. Second, here again and emphatically, as always in the Bible, the Lord himself is the reward of those who trust in him. "I am your shield, your very great reward."

The Bible's message is from first to last the proclamation of *the knowledge of God, the personal, individual knowledge of God*. Here is the Lord *talking to Abram*. Don't miss the obvious. Abram, the Lord's man, and God himself *are having a conversation!* It is a highly personal interaction between God and man. It is, if you will, a friendship, though one between a mere human being and the mighty God.

True enough, this is not a chat between equals. This is not the sort of conversation that we have with one another. A point is made of this. God appears to Abram in a vision in the first place and, in the

second instance, the Lord appeared to Abram in a deep sleep and a dreadful darkness. There is a great gulf between the infinite God and a mere wisp of a human being. But God stoops down to have a real conversation nonetheless. Indeed, it is so much a conversation that it almost sounds as if Abram is complaining to the Lord, even objecting to his plan. *That* is how personal this relationship had become.

And this is the utterly unique message of the Bible: that man can know God; not simply know *about* him but *know him as a person*, have a relationship with him of love, communication, loyalty, and willing service. This is not offered in Islam or Buddhism or any other of the world's religions or philosophies. In none of them does the Almighty stoop down to make himself known as a person to mere human beings. But he does precisely that throughout the Bible and in Christian experience ever since.

All the way through the Bible this is what is meant by salvation. "To know God" is just another way of saying "to be saved." Sinners come to be forgiven, come to obtain eternal life, by means of personal confidence they have placed in the living God *they have come to know* as Father, Savior, King, and Friend. What condescension on the Most High God's part: to stoop down to know *us* and walk *with us* in this personal even intimate way. The Lord making his promises to us, calling us to himself, and we sometimes complaining and whining to him about how he has ordered our lives. Whatever else that is, *it is a personal relationship!*

Again, this is not the way of the other religions of the world or the philosophies of mankind. They all teach some form of service or obeisance offered to God or to the universe as the means of gaining some favor from him or it. There is nothing particularly personal or intimate or familiar; certainly nothing *intensely personal and familiar* as here in Genesis 15. There is no necessity on God's part of drawing near and making himself known to us. This is not at all what we find in American civil religion, that sort of religiosity that is so common in American culture still today. According to 82% of Americans surveyed (so-called evangelicals did better by one percent!), the statement "God helps those who help themselves" is found in the Bible. It isn't! In other words, most people think the crucial initiative is ours, not the Lord's. And there is little or nothing here of any personal relationship with God. A majority of Americans think that the most important responsibility of any person, according to the Bible, is to take care of one's family! *NO! The most important thing is to know God.* You can't take care of your family, not really, not in every way that matters most and matters for eternity if you don't know God. What is the problem of mankind according to the Apostle Paul? They are *without God*. They do not know him. They do not talk to him and do not listen to what he has to say to them, to each of them as individuals.

People may believe that God exists and that he will reward or punish -- primarily reward -- but it means little to them. Of a personal knowledge of and relationship with this God, the Maker of Heaven and earth, they have no thought, no idea, no experience, and no imagination. Of a life lived in communion, in covenant fellowship, in friendship with this God they know nothing. Salvation for them and for the adherents of other religions is a matter of a distant God making calculations about the behavior of lives lived in virtual isolation from him. How different the teaching of the Word of God!

III. Then, finally, we must wait for God's promises to be fulfilled.

This too, said directly to Abram in vv. 13-16, is a prominent theme of the rest of the Bible. God works out his purposes in individual lives and in the world as a whole *slowly*. The New Testament writers frequently comment on this and make a point of saying in their own words what God told Abram here in v. 16. We must wait for the fulfillment of God's promises to us because God does not desire the death of the wicked but that all men should repent and come to the knowledge of the truth. He is going to give the unbelieving world every opportunity to repent and believe and be saved and we have to wait for that reason. We have to wait until everyone who can come in or will come, *has* come in. Only then can the end come.

So much of the difficulty of the Christian life, so much of the challenge of faith is simply the necessity that we wait because the promised blessings of God are a long time in coming. It would be centuries before Israel would gain possession of Canaan; 2,000 years before the Messiah appeared to take away the sins of the world, including Abram's sins! (To be sure, because Abram trusted in the Lord and his promise, he received the righteousness of Christ ahead of time.) Abram would have to wait still many more years for a son even after Genesis 15. He would die without seeing his descendants in possession of the Promised Land, and long before he had become the great nation God promised to raise from his seed.

And in the same way and for the same reasons, we wait still today. Much that was promised in the OT has long since come to pass. That is our great privilege and advantage. But we wait for the Lord's return; indeed we have waited as long as Abram and his descendants had to wait for Christ's first coming. We wait for the fulfillment of this very promise God made to Abram here, that all the world would be blessed through him. The day is coming, we greet it from afar, but it is not here yet and so we must live in hope and, in all likelihood, die in hope as Abram did.

This is the Christian faith: the divine initiative to call sinful human beings into fellowship with God himself. And this is the Christian life: trusting the promise of God through the long wait before they are fulfilled in our lives and in the life of the world.

I've been reading a fascinating new study of the Spanish Civil War, the war that presaged the Second World War. It is Richard Rhodes' *Hell and Good Company*. People came from all over the world, from Asia and North America and all over Europe, to fight in that war. For the republicans, in particular, it was a crusade. All sorts of men, who had no experience of warfare, arrived hoping to be made soldiers in the fight. They were committed to the cause. They thought Franco a deeply evil man (which he was). Amateurs though they were, they bravely manned the front lines and many of them were killed or wounded. George Orwell, Ernest Hemingway and others fought or helped in other ways. Alas they had given themselves to what was to prove a losing cause.

But as I read the narrative -- the military action, the moral passion all around, the suffering and death, even the romance between men and women who met in Spain -- it is eerie how little anyone seemed to care at all about what actually matters most in human life. They wanted victory in battle, they worked to defend the Spanish government, but, all in all, at bottom there was little to choose between them, the republicans and the nationalists, and their allies: the Russians on one side, the Germans the Italians on the other. Christians, of course, have all of that too; the moral passion, the

high drama, the great deeds to be performed in life, and even the romance. But we have something far more important first.

Neither group cared about the word and promise of God. Neither had their hopes set on the Promised Land. Neither lived their lives as an extension of a personal relationship with the Almighty. So it has always been. The world went on around Abram all unknowing, as it goes on around us. The things that matter in Genesis 15 don't matter at all to vast multitudes of people with whom we are rubbing shoulders every day. But into that long ago world broke in now and again the word of God, as it breaks in still today. Then as now a glorious future begins to unfold before the sight of a man or woman, and, then as now, the long wait begins.

That is what it means to be a Christian, what it has always meant and what it means today.