

Genesis 15: 1-21! The LORD can be counted upon to keep his promises to us!

This pivotal text continues the story of Abraham and his family. **This is a foundational story** in a **foundational book** disclosing a **foundational picture of God!** This foundational picture of God is beneficial for understanding God and for fostering a **proper way of seeing God and how we relate to Him.** This pivotal chapter of the book not only functions to introduce us God's covenant with Abraham, but also provides candid cameos of God relating to Abram: and Abram in turn, relating to God. Upon careful examination and reflection, these insights gained from this chapter can shape and help govern how we relate to God. Let us take a closer look into this chapter.

Before looking at the text let me make a few comments regarding the circumstances that frame the event of God's **fourth communication with Abram** in the story about him. This chapter begins by saying: "*After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision...**Fear not...***" I contend that **our appreciation** of what takes place in this chapter involving God's appearance and communication with Abram is better achieved by having a **rough outline of key the events** that take place in his life.

First of all, God's initial call for Sarai and Abram to leave Haran and migrate to Canaan ¹ is a **critical baseline event** that happens in their life. Another helpful context marker is found at the very beginning of the next chapter (C16). This is a story focused upon Sarai giving her servant Hagar to be a wife to Abram in order for them to gain a child. This key event occurred "*ten years after they had lived in the land of Canaan.*" **Bracketed by these two key events is a period of ten years!**

Significant key and time consuming events occurring within this 10 year period include: **Abram & Sarai's sojourn in Egypt**, Lot's separation from A & S, and Abram's rescue of Lot and family. **These three key events occupied months of activity.** The previous chapters did not even give a clue of what amount of undisclosed time passed within which Abram spent time sojourning at **different locations shepherding his herds.** Therefore, this pivotal event of God's **fourth appearance to Abram** comes within this period spanning 10 years of having first settled in Canaan. My guess is at least 5 years have already gone by since God's initial appearance to Abram including his initial promise of giving **both land and offspring.** So why is this important to know? Simply it provides **perspective** for appreciating **God's reiteration of his two main promises** once again! This background also provides possible grounds **for the timing of God's reassurance to Abram** by this fourth appearance by God. Why is that? Abram does not see *the Lord God keeping his main promises to him.* Abram is thus **wavering in his faith** and discouraged. **He is giving up on God!** Can we as readers of this story relate to Abram's mind and heart at this pivotal time?

I. God's Foundational Disclosure of Himself to Abraham; followed by Abram's less than enthusiastic response. (Gen. 15: 1-3) This first section of the story is amazing! This brief section narrates the appearance of God and the **direct communication by God** to Abram of **something Abram needs to know and remember!** Unlike the previous appearances by God which focused upon conveying God's promises or instructions to Abram, this appearance by God **is focused upon God disclosing something about God himself and his relationship to Abram!** This appearance by God represents the first time that God **explicitly declares** something that

¹ In Gen. 12:4 we are told that Abram is 75 years old.

Abram and Sarai need to know and remember **about God Himself** and **his relationship to them!** What does God deem so important for Abram & Sarai to know about Himself?

God wants Abram and Sarai to know that **He is their protector and provider!** This is my key reflection and summary of God's revelation of himself in verse one by God to Abram. ***"Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be great."*** This is a momentous verse declaring **two foundational truths that God** wanted Abram to grasp and for us to grasp regarding who He is! What is so amazing and significant about this statement? First, it adequately **sums up for Abram and us the nature of God's relationship and involvement** in Abram and his family's lives up to this point. The previously cited incidents concerning Abram and Sarai's **sojourn in Egypt, God' hand guiding them to Canaan,** God' blessings upon Abram & Sarai making them wealthy, and God's great victory granted to Abram over Kedorlaomer and his allies! All of these events **represent specific instances of God's protection and provision!** Or we could say **all of these events signify God blessing Abram and Sarai.** Or Hamilton rightly sees God being **Abram's Benefactor**- the giver of all the good things that Abram and Sarai enjoy! Surely, the reader expects that Abram once again will fall down and worship the LORD for watching over them and blessing them in so many ways.

But, surprisingly, this does not happen! Abram does not fall down in worship, as he apparently did in God's second appearance to Abram which is narrated in chapter 12. This time **Abram complains to God** saying: *"O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no offspring, and (someone not of my own family) a member of my household will be my heir."* Wenham in his commentary calls this *a pitiful response.*² Perhaps! I prefer to see this as **a candid statement** of exactly how Abram and possibly Sarai felt at this moment in time and a valuable insight **into what really matters to both of them.** We have already been told³that Abram was rich and powerful! But, Sarai and Abram **were childless.** They lacked an heir to their estate and someone to carry on his name. Abram's comment and Sarai's explicit comment in the next chapter (the LORD has prevented me from bearing children) discloses the both the pain and anxiety about this issue in their lives. Abram's comment might express ingratitude. However, I think it discloses **the pain of someone who is on the verge of giving up waiting for God to keep his promises!**

II. God's first response to Abram's complaint and Abram's subsequent response. (vs. 4-6)

A. God responds graciously and compassionately to Abram's complaint. Just like God's original opening address to Abram *"fear not"*, God in this second section addresses **Abram's fear of remaining childless** and without an heir with a twofold response: First: **Eliezer** (this man that Abram mentioned) will not be Abram's heir. Second, God pointedly states to Abram once again ***"your very own son shall be your heir"*** (vs. 4 ESV). Furthermore, God makes his response even stronger with **an object lesson** to Abram. The text says: God brought Abram outside when it was presumably nighttime saying: "Look towards heaven, and number the stars, if you can count them, ***so shall your offspring be.***" Wow! What a great picture and object lesson of emphatic ally reassuring Abram!

B. Abram believed God this time. Why? Abram perhaps just needed a little reassurance of

² Wenham, Gordon The Word Biblical Commentary Genesis 1-15 p. 334 1987

³ Gen. 13:2 "Abram was very rich in livestock, silver, gold" He was not only rich but powerful having 318 trained men under his command. (Gen. 14:14)

the promises that God had previously given him. What is God's *iconic* response to Abram? The text concludes by declaring that the LORD "counted it to him as righteousness!" What did this statement mean here? I take it to mean that the LORD was pleased that Abram by believing God at this point did **the right thing**.⁴ Going forward from this encounter with God, Abram was renewed in his faith that God would and could fulfill his promise of giving a son and heir to Sarah and himself.

III. God's reaffirmation giving the land of Canaan to Abram. (vs. 7-19) The first section of this chapter focused upon one of the two main promises given to Abram and Sarai- **a son and heir**. This second section focuses upon the second of God's main promises to A & S- the promise of giving the **land of Canaan to Abram and his offspring**. Remember that God had promised on two previous encounters with Abram⁵ to give the land of Canaan to Abram and his offspring. This is an important promise to Abram. The reiteration of this promise **of giving this land** is reiterated here in this same appearance by God to Abram once again. Admittedly, the narration of this aspect of God's promise -the gift of the land of Canaan-accounts for twice the number of verses. It is my interpretation of this passage that the promise of the land is of lesser importance to Abram. Abram and Sarai have been living in Canaan for almost 10 years. Abram has become extremely wealthy. But, he does not own anything yet. There is little prospect of that situation immediately changing. This second and longest of the two sections addresses the issue of the God's fulfilling his promise of the **giving the land** to Abram. Here once again the overall intent of God's communication with Abram is to reassure Abram that God can be trusted to keep his promises! Let us briefly see the following key points from this second section.

A. God takes the initiative to reassure Abram's faith on this matter. Without signally a transition, God shifts *the focus of his communication* with Abram from the subject of giving a son to reminding Abram of his promise to give the land of Canaan. And he (God) said to him, "*I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.*" Point: God took the initiative to buttress Abram's faltering faith on this matter by reiterating still once again His commitment to keep this second of two main promises to Abram. God reassures him by reminding Abram that this was one of the main reasons for calling them out of Ur years earlier.

B. Abram is not reassured this time! Concerning the promise of a son, Abram is reassured merely by God reiterating his promise. Concerning the land, Abram needs something more for Abram to believe God's promise this time. Abram responds to God saying: "O Lord God, how am I know that I will possess it?" What does God do in response to Abram's lingering doubt to believe God's words to him on this point? **God makes a covenant with Abram.**

C. God made or cut a covenant with Abram. This is the subject of the strange and mysterious ritual of cutting in half a three year old goat, heifer, and ram and the image of a flashing torch at dusk passing through these pieces. Point of this ritual is clear: "On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram saying: "To your offspring I give this land...." Scholars like Wenham and Hugenberger see this ritual as signifying something very significant. By this enacted symbolism, God was making a solemn promise to keep his word to Abram. God was by the cutting and blazing torch passing through the animals **taking a curse upon himself, if he does not keep**

⁴ Wenham ibid. p330 "Here Abram is not described as doing righteousness. Rather faith (Abram's faith) is being counted for righteousness. Normally righteousness results in acquittal by the divine judge." My interpretation is that here God approves and commends Abram once again believing and counting upon God to fulfill his promises. God in effect is approving Abram for this.

⁵ Gen 12:7, 13:14-15

his promise to Abram. ⁶

D. God provides/warns Abram and us with Mission Critical Information. Tucked into these final words and reassurances of giving the land of Canaan to Abram, is **a sober prediction** of the upcoming fate that Abram and Sarai's offspring can expect in the centuries to come. In this address Abram and anyone reading this account should certainly conclude that God once again is promising to be with Abram's offspring blessing them sometime in the future by fulfilling his promise to give them the land of Canaan.

While God certainly wants to reassure Abram on these two points, God wants Abram and his future offspring to know most certainly that their offspring will be blessed by God, they will nonetheless **experience affliction, hardship, and displacement from the land** that was promised to them. This was critical information that they needed to know and remember. God's blessing upon them as God's special covenant people was an enormous privilege. But, this did not make them or us immune from **suffering affliction, hardship**, or experiencing a delay of his the perceived fulfillment of God's promises to us. God's point to Abram and Sarai, and to the generation of Israel who first heard these words addressed by Moses as they were about to enter Canaan years afterwards, or to God's people in any generation including us is: **God is faithful!**
God can be counted upon to keep his promises!

⁶ Wenham p.332