

Genesis 15 – Darkness and Destiny

Introduction

What an extraordinary passage of Scripture! What on earth is it all about – severed animals and smoking fire pots...!

The title given to this section in the NIV gives us a good clue as to what it is all about. The title is “God’s Covenant with Abram” (that was Abraham’s name at this stage of the story). This section is about God’s Covenant promises to Abram. This strange incident is designed as a demonstration to Abram, and a statement to us, that God underwrites his covenant with his own life. It points us to the Lord Jesus and prepares us for our Communion service this evening.

Let’s look at it more closely. First:

The Background

In the opening chapters of Genesis we read of a world created by God for his glory, but a world gone wrong – from the eating of the forbidden fruit and expulsion from Eden, through the destruction of a world of wickedness by the flood, to the rebellion at Babel which results in scattered peoples, all speaking different languages. But in Genesis 12 we read of God calling Abram from one of these scattered nations. He was called to leave his home and family for a land that God would show him. God promised to make him the father of many nations and that through him all peoples on earth would be blessed.

God’s Covenant with Abram, the solemn promises made to him, were God’s answer to a world gone wrong. Through Abram and his descendants blessing would flood the whole world.

But what had happened to these promises? Abram had originally travelled from Ur in the Chaldees with his nephew, Lot. They had been forced to split up because they had so many flocks and herds and Lot had chosen the best of the country. Where was the promise of the new and better land that God had made to Abram? Moreover, Abram and his wife Sarai still had no children; how could God’s promise be fulfilled, his promise of descendants through whom the whole world would be blessed?

In the chapter just before the one we read this evening, Abram had rescued Lot and his family from being captives of the four kings who had gone to war against Sodom and Gomorrah. In doing this, he not only rescued the inhabitants of Sodom, he also recovered the goods of the king of Sodom and returned them to him. The king of Sodom urged Abram to keep some the plunder for himself, since he had rescued the people, but Abram replied, “I have raised my hand to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal. So that you will never be able to say, ‘I made Abram rich.’” (Genesis 14:22-23). Abram would accept nothing from the hands of the king of this evil city: he trusted in God to bless him and prosper him.

In this Abram is an example to us. Paul later refers to Abraham as “the man of faith” (Galatians 3:9). Do we trust God, even when it is difficult to do so – even when another path would seem to bring more immediate benefits?

Genesis 15

And so we come to the passage that has been read to us this evening, and it begins with God’s own response to the way Abram has dealt with the king of Sodom: “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.’” (Genesis 15:1). God declares that he himself is Abram’s inheritance; Abram needs no other source of blessing.

But Abram cannot resist asking about the heir which God has promised him. Perhaps he will have to be content with his servant Eliezer being his heir. No, says the Lord, you will have a son of your own.

God tells Abram to look up at the night sky; his heirs will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. Moreover, your heirs will possess this land where you are living as a stranger. He may have seemed to have lost out on the good land God had promised, but it will be possessed by his descendants. God has not forgotten his promises.

Abram, we are told, believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (v.6). The righteous person is the one who trusts in God and places his confidence in the promises God has made – even against the odds.

Nevertheless, Abram asks “How can I know...?”, “How can I be sure...?” (15:8). Isn’t this so often our question, a question reflecting our own doubts and fears? How can I be sure that God loves me? How can I be sure that all will be well? How can I be sure that beyond this life there is the hope of life to come, life better than anything I experience now? How can I be sure that what the Bible says is true? How can I be sure?

Look at God’s answer to Abram, for it is God’s answer to us also. Abram’s question gives rise to an extraordinary demonstration of God’s commitment to do what he has promised.

Abram is told to bring a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove and a pigeon. He is to cut each of the first three animals in half, arranging the halves opposite each other in a line along the ground. What a gruesome task! As the sun set, Abram fell into a deep sleep; he was anaesthetised; he could do nothing. God had disabled him so that he will know for sure that there is nothing he can do to secure the promises. And as Abram entered a dreadful darkness, the Lord appeared to him and said, “*Know for certain* that your descendants ... will come back here” (vv. 13,16). The covenant promise of descendants and land is repeated with added force and assurance.

But there is more here than a word from God. For then, in the darkness of nightfall, Abram sees a smoking brazier and flaming torch passing between the severed halves of the animals. This is the Lord – think of the pillar of fire and smoke which would later be the symbol of God’s presence with the Israelites in the wilderness. It is by this strange symbolism the Lord made a covenant with Abram (15:18), assuring him that his descendants would inherit the land. By this strange symbolism, Abram is shown that he can be sure that God will fulfil his word.

Walking between the halves of severed animals was a recognised means of making a solemn promise or covenant in the ancient world. The person making the promise was saying, “If I fail to do what I have promised, may what has been done to these animals be done to me.” It was normally required from a conquered king by the great king who had defeated him as a promise of perpetual servitude. By walking between the severed animals, the defeated king would be saying that he bound himself to serve the great king at the cost of his own life. But here it is *God* who makes the oath. He assures Abram of the certainty of his promises by underwriting them with *his own life*. God’s own life guarantees the fulfilment of the promise. It’s an extraordinary picture.

How does all of this speak to us?

The New Covenant, sealed with the blood of Christ

This dramatic picture finds its ultimate fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ. In him, God has come and underwritten his promises to us with his own blood. Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant. He is the descendant of Abraham through whom all nations will be blessed. His body was broken for us and his blood shed for us – the blood of the New Covenant; the blood by which God guarantees that what he has promised, he will do. Jesus entered the place of thick darkness for us as the sun refused to shine, so that we might be brought into the light of glory. Because of his death and resurrection, nothing and no-one can break this covenant; nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. His resurrection from the dead is the guarantee that we shall share in the life to come – the life of a creation made new.

How can I be sure? I can be sure because God has underwritten his promises to me in the blood of his own Son. This truth is movingly and powerfully expressed in one of my favourite hymns:

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea.
A great high Priest whose name is Love
Who ever lives and pleads for me.
My name is graven on His hands,
My name is written on His heart.
I know that while in Heaven He stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart.

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end of all my sin.
Because the sinless Saviour died
My sinful soul is counted free.
For God the just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me.

Behold Him there the risen Lamb,
My perfect spotless righteousness,
The great unchangeable I AM,
The King of glory and of grace,
One with Himself I cannot die.
My soul is purchased by His blood,
My life is hid with Christ on high,
With Christ my Saviour and my God!

Charitie L. Bancroft, 1863

The promises of God are sealed to us through the broken body and shed blood of God's Son. They are promises which have been given us at the cost of the life of God himself and are guaranteed by the life and power of the risen Saviour.

It is in this confidence that we come to Communion this evening: remembering that because he died, we live and shall live. Let us come humbly yet boldly and, above all, thankfully, filled with the confidence that rests in a crucified and risen Saviour.

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