

STUDY THREE — GENESIS 15
GOD'S PROMISE

P R O M I S E

— GENESIS 12 - 25 —

GOD'S GRACIOUS INITIATIVE
IN THE LIFE & TIMES OF ABRAHAM

OVERVIEW

Genesis 15:1-6 – With newfound enemies following the expedition of Genesis 14, God reminds Abram that he need not fear, for he has God himself as his shield. Though Abram faithfully declined the offer of plunder from the King of Sodom, he is reminded that he won't come up short, for God himself is his very great reward.

Yet Abram's response in verse 2 betrays a despondency about the future – he lacks an heir and wonders how God's promises could come to fulfilment. The repeated heartbreak of failed conception has taken its toll. Accordingly, Abram indicates that his mind had turned to adopting a household servant – Eliezer of Damascus – as his heir. This is in keeping with an ancient near eastern practise whereby wealthy, childless couples would adopt a household servant so as to care for them in their older years in place of a son (Longman, 202). This also explains why Lot is not included as an heir. Abram again seeks to manipulate and manoeuvre in order to fulfil the promise.

Yet God promises that Abram will indeed have a biological son. It is not insignificant that God powerfully conveys this promise with reference to the stars – for given the lunar worship that was so prevalent in Abram's homeland, he was likely well acquainted with their beauty and sheer number. In the face of impossibility, Abram takes God at his word and believes. This is faith.

Genesis 15:17-21 – Having addressed the first part of his promise (people), God now turns to the corresponding promise of land.

Given the affirmation of Abram's faith in verse 6, it's right to see Abram's request for certainty in verse 8 not as an expression of unbelief, but of faith seeking understanding and battling doubt (cf. "I believe help me overcome my unbelief!" Mark 9:34). Genuine faith isn't immune from struggles and doubts, but through them all, at its core, refuses to jettison trust, confidence and reverence for God.

God looks to give Abram certainty by initiating a covenant ceremony which appears strange to modern eyes, yet was an accepted custom in Abram's Mesopotamian homeland whereby animals would be killed, divided and their carcasses walked through by each party in order to solemnize a covenant (cf. Jer 34:17-20). Yet significantly, it is only the presence of God which passes through the carcasses. God thus graciously initiates a unilateral, unconditional covenant, 'saying in effect that he will be like those killed and divided animals if he does not keep his promises.' (Longman, 204). This of course brings Abram certainty, because God is indestructible and true. Yet this promise will nonetheless be for a future generation, and the awaited glory will be preceded by the suffering of slavery in Egypt.

PROMISE+FULFILMENT

FAITH ALONE

God's dealings with Abram here reveal the gospel in advance to us – that faith alone, and not works, place us in proper relationship to God.

To have righteousness credited or imputed to us is to receive a righteousness that is not our own, but Christ's (2 Cor 5:21). Jesus died on the cross in our place, that we who trust in him might stand in his place and have his perfect standing before God (his righteousness) credited to our account.

Thus when Abram looked to the stars and trusted God, it was because of Jesus' payment for his sins some 2000 years later, that his faith could be credited as righteousness. And so it is for us when we come to Christ in faith.

Romans 3:21-4:25 powerfully points out that Abram's justification in Genesis 15 came prior to the Law and prior to his circumcision (thus whilst a Gentile and not a Jew), reinforcing that we are saved by faith alone and not by works.

James 2 also famously quotes this passage and reminds us that though we are saved by faith alone, saving faith is never alone and will be accompanied by obedience which flows out from our faith. Works are thus the fruit and not the root of our salvation.

Like Abram, God calls us to respond to his grand and mind-blowing promises with faith that seeks not to work, not to manoeuvre, not to earn, but that simply trusts.

GETTING STARTED

1. What is the greatest offer you've ever been made? How did you respond?

INTO THE TEXT

Read Genesis 15:1-6

2. God calls Abram not to fear (v. 1). What might have been causing Abram to be afraid? How does God's response allay these fears?
3. On what basis is Abram counted as righteous? (cf. Rom 3:21-4:5) What does it mean to be counted as righteous? (cf. Rom 4:6-8)
4. How does Abram's example demonstrate the relationship between saving faith and works? (cf. James 2:20-24)
5. What are the ways, or when are the times, when you find yourself slipping back into a mindset of 'works-based righteousness' in your relationship with God?

Read Genesis 15:7-21

6. What does the fire-pot and torch represent? (cf. Exo 3:2; 19:16-19; 40:34-38)
7. What is the significance of the torn animals? (cf. Jer 34:17-20) And why is it significant that it is *not* Abraham who passes through them?
8. How did this covenant ceremony give Abram certainty about God's promises (v. 8)?
9. Is it possible for a believer to have complete certainty that they too will one day inherit God's promise of eternal life?

TAKEAWAY

10. *'We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone.'*
Like Abram, has your faith in God and corresponding obedience changed the course of your life? Do you see evidences of faith in your day to day life, or do you need to repent of a distinct lack of evidence?
11. *'The whole point of faith is that it's power doesn't rest in itself but in its object; God himself, the God who does the impossible, who gives children to the elderly and infertile, who gives a land to a people that didn't even then exist, and who takes broken and sinful people...and himself atones for their sins.'* (Duguid, 58)
Spend time reminding each other of the glorious object of your faith. For those comfortable, perhaps share a favourite scripture which speaks of the character of God, or share an instance of God's faithfulness in your own life.