

V 6 of Genesis 15:

Abram believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Genesis 15 is a chapter about faith. We might say every chapter in the bible is about faith.

That's the response we're meant to make to the word of God. To believe. And then behave.

Today we ask what Genesis 15 has to teach us about the faith? About trust. About hearing. And then believing God's word.

But we miss the message of this chapter if we believe it is only about our faith. It is a chapter first and foremost about the faithfulness of the Lord to his promises.

15 of the 21 verses in the chapter outline the Lord speaking of his promises. We will see the remarkably passive part Abram plays.

We'll look at the chapter in two parts. Firstly, the Faithfulness of the Lord. And secondly, the faith of Abram.

The order is important. Our instinct when we consider what it means to have a right relationship with God is to begin with the question 'What must I do?'

We take a co-operative approach with God. We hear clichés like, 'God helps those who help themselves'.

Or, we look at other people and, 'If only I had your faith'. Sometimes we look at ourselves and say, 'If only I had more faith.'

We wind up asking, 'What must I do?'

In Genesis 15 we discover the better question. 'What has the Lord promised?'

The Faithfulness of the Lord

Observe the faithfulness of the Lord. He begins the passage as the promise-maker and concludes it as the promise-keeper.

What does the Lord promise to Abram?

Promise 1. V 1. The Lord will be Abram's shield and very great reward.

The chapter begins on a high note even if Abram's subsequent questions bring us down a notch or two.

Some time has passed since Abram's victories of chapter 14 and the blessing from King Melchizedek.

The shield and reward of v 1 are military terms. The Lord's protection. A prize the Lord provides.

The New Testament writer Paul's prize is his heavenly calling.

In the book of Hebrews, Abraham is commended because he was looking forward to the city whose architect and builder is God. Genesis 15 is the beginning of that search.

Promise 2. V 4. The Lord will give Abram many descendants through his own flesh and blood.

Promise 3. V 7. The Lord will give Abram possession of the land in which he dwells.

Restatements of the promise of Genesis 12: 7. 'To your offspring I will give this land.' Some time has elapsed since that first encounter. Years, actually.

The Lord is assuring Abram his promises are unfolding as he said they would. The believer's life is much more a marathon than a sprint.

Promise 4. V 12. The Lord will reveal the future for Abram's descendants.

400 years of being strangers and being mis-treated. After which they will come out with great possessions. And return to the land God had promised.

The judgment upon the Amorites, v 16, will be completed in the fourth generation. When Joshua enters Canaan after the rescue from Egypt.

A generation is thought to represent 100 years given the lifespans we read about in these times.

Promise 5. V 15. The Lord will reveal the future for Abram himself.

You will go to your ancestors in peace and die at a good old age. According to Genesis 25:7: 175 years.

Abram will not enter the promised land with his people, but the Lord promises direction and blessing through his years.

Finally, promise 6. V 18. The Lord makes a covenant agreement with Abram to assure him the promises will be fulfilled. Completed. Reach their intended end.

If the sin of the Amorites meets its full measure in judgment, then the blessing of the Lord's promises will overflow beyond measure.

The ceremony involving animals cut in half will seem strange to us. A smoking fire pot. A blazing torch passing between the pieces.

In Abram's day the parties to the agreement would pass between the pieces to express their commitment to the covenant.

The smoke and fire of v 17 are symbols of the Lord's presence. Much like how he would lead his people through Moses.

But in this ceremony only the Lord would pass between the pieces.

Abram was to understand that when it comes to the Lord fulfilling his promises he is not reliant on anyone.

The Faith of Abram

So, what is Abram's role? What should we say about the 5 verses he occupies out of 21 in the chapter?

Second point. The Faith of Abram.

Abram's response to the Lord's promises is very much like ours. 'How's this going to work?'

V 2. I'm childless. Looks to me like one of my household servants is going to take over my estate. How will this promise of a great nation come about?

V 8. How can I know I will take possession of the land? According to v 19, it presently belongs to a lot of other people.

'How's this going to work?' Have you found yourself asking that question of God?

The Lord's reply to Abram reveals for us one very important reality when it comes to the Lord fulfilling his promises. He wouldn't be relying on Abram. He doesn't rely on me. He doesn't rely on you. Faith in the Lord is not a cooperative arrangement.

The Lord's answer to Abram's queries are so beyond his capacity to achieve.

V 5. 'Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be.'

And, v 8, Lord's answer to Abram's query about possessing the land.

Abram is placed into a deep sleep. V 12. A thick and dreadful darkness comes over him as the Lord of Heaven and Earth unveils the future.

The threefold promise of Genesis 12 begins to take shape for Abram. A great people. A great land. And the great blessing?

God will use his servant Abram to fulfil his purposes. Even though he will never be reliant on him.

After Abram falls into a deep sleep we hear nothing further from him until the next chapter.

It's not like Abram can say, 'I see. We're going to work this out together then.'

Isaiah 55:8:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

As these promises unfold throughout the pages of scripture, we discover that the only way they reach their full measure, their intended end, is when God himself steps into our world to bring about their completion.

Hebrews 1:1. 'In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son'.

The same Lord who spoke to Abram speaks to us and says, Luke 9:35:

'This is my son, whom I have chosen. Listen to him.'

Abram's response of faith to the Lord teaches us about our response.

That response is not found in his questions. It is summed up in words that are not his own. They are inserted by the author. V 6:

Abram believed the Lord, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

Had this verse not been inserted we would have been left guessing about Abram's understanding of the Lord's promise to him.

V 6 is carefully worded to ensure we know whose activity matters when it comes to faith. The Lord's.

It's not that Abram's belief 'prompts' the Lord to credit him with righteousness. As if the Lord was waiting for Abram to take the first step.

It is that Abram's belief 'is' the credit of righteousness. Faith becomes righteousness. The word credited could be translated 'instead'.

Righteousness in the Old Testament is usually about right behaviour. Moral conduct. God himself is described as being righteous. And righteousness can be described as a God-pleasing activity.

But in v 6 Abram is not described as 'doing' anything. The Lord is the active one. Belief in the word of God is the right and proper response to the word of the Lord. It is righteousness.

It will of course lead to righteous action, but here belief stands alone as the response of taking God at his word. The heart of enjoying right relationship with him.

There are three life-changing reasons this is a model for us.

Firstly, the Lord is given the glory for his faithfulness to his promises. It is by grace that we are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is gift of God, so that no one can boast.

Only the Lord passed through the pieces in the covenant ceremony. Only his Son Jesus is able to achieve the fulfilment of his plans.

Secondly, Abram's faith is so that we might see that the response to the Lord's promises is simple. Take him at his word.

Simple. Not simplistic.

If we believe it's simple, then we recognise belief is powerful. A gift of God's grace that brings us into God's Kingdom, and positions us to serve for its progress.

If we think this is just simplistic then we will likely be saying, 'What must I do?' There must be something I need to contribute. It can't be right that I have nothing to bring!

When Jesus went to the cross as the fulfilment of the Lord's promises to Abram, the only thing we had to bring to contribute was our sinfulness.

Unless we humbly accept this and fall upon God's mercy, any approach to God will only keep us apart from him.

You can boast about your works before others. Perhaps your religious pedigree. Your résumé of rosters. Your church membership. Your life's achievements.

God is unimpressed.

But it's more than that.

Paul goes on to say that if you rely on what you can do, or what you have done, to get yourself right before God, faith means nothing. Romans 4:14. The Lord's promise becomes worthless.

We believe there's nothing harmless about having a little bit of religion in our lives. Thinking that God will be impressed with our efforts.

If you're busy living for the approval of others, it's odds on you're probably treating God the same way.

The Lord does not rely on anyone, as if he needed anything.

Yet in his grace he reaches out to draw us to himself through Jesus Christ who is the fulfilment of his promises.

We all speak about striving for the fulfilled life. The bible says it comes when we come to realise that God's word is sufficient. It is enough.

Because you are credited with the same gift of righteousness as Abram when you believe the word of God.

It constantly draws you into the revelation from God through his word that Jesus Christ is your Saviour and Lord.

Feel the relief. God is not relying on you. Instead he promises to bless you when you take him at his word.

Let the Lord be your shield and reward.