

ABRAHAM

a faith-filled friend of God



Lesson 6 | When God Makes a Deal

Genesis 15:7-21

Have you ever had someone promise you or guarantee you they would get a task done and found yourself thinking, “I doubt it.” Maybe this is because you were dealing with someone who was normally unreliable, and no matter how easy the task might be they never seemed able to get things done in a timely matter. On the other hand, maybe it was someone who was typically very reliable, yet what they said they would do just seemed impossible. In Genesis 15, Abram and God are having this kind of a conversation. God is making big promises to Abram, and while Abram trusts God, he is having a hard time seeing how God could come through. So Abram asks God some questions, and God graciously answers those questions.

Why do you think God answers Abram’s questions here rather than simply demand blind obedience?

In our previous lesson we saw that God promised to protect and bless Abram, and Abram wrestled through questions about how that could happen given the fact he was childless. God responds by reaffirming that He would give Abram an offspring, and Abram believes God. In this lesson, God promises Abram that He will give the land of Canaan to Abram’s seed, but Abram asks God how he can know for certain that will be the case. In response, God makes one of the most powerful demonstrations we see anywhere in Scripture – He makes an unconditional covenant with Abram promising that what He has said He will do He will certainly do. Although some of this passage might seem a little odd to us, what God is doing here would have made good sense to Abram, and would have powerfully communicated exactly how committed God was.

The Background to the Covenant Ceremony (vv 7-11)

This chapter is building to that powerful moment when God binds Himself to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abram. But to highlight the importance of that moment the pace of the story slows down, and we get to see all the details leading up to this big moment.

The Need for the Covenant (v 7-8)

God begins by declaring His name and reiterating His promise to Abram. Here God describes Himself as “Yahweh, the one who brought you out of Ur to give you this land.” God has indeed brought Abram out of Ur safely and has protected Abram and cared for him as he wandered in the land. As we see elsewhere in

Scripture, God reveals Himself by His name (Yahweh, “I am”) and by His character (bringing Abram out of Ur and promising to give him Canaan).

Where else in Scripture do we see God emphasize His name and His works?

But Abram responds to this powerful proclamation of God with a surprising question, a question that is especially surprising after we have just been told that Abram believed God two verses earlier in Genesis 15:6. Rather than confidently take God at His Word, Abram asks how he will know this is true. Literally he says, “By what will I know I will inherit it?” Abram essentially says, “What else can you give me to prove that I really will inherit the land?” If we were reading this story for the first time, we might be shocked and maybe even a little nervous about what God will say to such a bold question. But to our surprise, God not only does not reprimand Abram, He does the very thing Abram asks for – God gives Abram something firm to prove that God will do what He has said He will do.

Why do you think this did not upset God, but instead gave Abram what He asked for?

What does this response teach us about the character of our God?

The Preparation for the Covenant (v 9-11)

This chapter is one of the strangest accounts in the Bible if you don’t know a little bit of Bible background. God tells Abram to grab some animals, and the next thing we know Abram is cutting them up and setting them out in the open. We might be left wondering why Abram is cutting up animals, what the deal is with chasing away birds, and what significance there is that a smoking torch passes between the carcasses of the animals. Later on we are told that God is this day making a covenant with Abram (cf Gen 15:18), but what do dead animals have to do with a covenant?

It’s helpful at this point to check with a cross-reference that can help illuminate what is going on here. In Jeremiah 34:18-20, we read about two parties walking through animals that have been cut in half as they make a covenant. Research into ancient near eastern treaty practices confirm that this was a common way of formalizing an agreement. Two parties would walk between the body parts of a dead animal as a gruesome, vivid way of saying, “If I break this promise may what happened to these animals happen to me.”¹ Abram would have been familiar with this way of making a covenant, and so when God said to him, “Cut up some animals and lay them out,” Abram likely knew what God was planning. It would be as God told someone today, “I will certainly do that. In fact, why don’t you get your lawyers to draw up the papers?”

Why would God make a covenant with Abram? Shouldn’t His Word have been enough?

¹ Although it is a different Hebrew word, the expression for “make” a covenant in 15:18 is the usual Hebrew word for “cut,” because in Hebrew you don’t “make” a covenant, you “cut” a covenant (like we “cut a deal”). It’s impossible to know if this expression came from dividing the animal as we see here, but that suggestion has been made and certainly seems plausible.

Abram jumps into action. After all, wouldn't you? If God Himself suggested that He would come and ratify a solemn deal to bless you and your children, wouldn't you work hard to make sure things were ready? Verses 10 and 11 are full of action – Abram brings the animals, cuts the animals, lays the animals apart, and drives away scavengers. Abram followed God's instructions immediately and exactly, and although we don't know how long it was that he was chasing away birds, it seems like it was a long time. Abram knew what was coming, but God made Abram work hard for it.

What purpose might God have in making Abram work for the covenant ceremony?

The Covenant Ceremony (v 12-21)

After working tirelessly all day to keep the area prepared for the ceremony, Abram at last falls into a deep sleep, in which he has another vision (cf Gen 15:1) that shows him how serious God is about the promise He has made. As we look at this account, it's important to notice the setting for the ceremony, what exactly God predicts concerning the future, and finally God's ratification of the covenant.

The Setting for the Covenant Ceremony (v 12)

Verse 12 is another verse that seems strange at first. After working so hard for so long, Abram falls asleep. Not only that, but this sounds like the beginning of a nightmare, not a happy, fun covenant ceremony. We read that a horror of great darkness, or a dreadful darkness falls over him. So why is Abram sleeping? And why is there such an ominous start to this dream?

Abram falling asleep seems to function in at least two ways. First, this is a sign that Abram is about to receive supernatural revelation from God. As Calvin notes, Numbers 12:6 gives visions and dreams as the ways that God speaks to His prophets, and in chapter 15 Abram both receives a vision (cf 15:1) and now a dream.² Not only this, the account that follows highlights the fact that Abram plays no further part. After the flurry of activity in verses 10-11, Abram falls asleep and God takes over. While Abram had a part to play, it is God who enacts the covenant, Abram must do nothing.

Why do you think it is important that Abram is asleep and passive during the covenant ceremony?

What about this darkness and dread? For starters, this sets the tone for the news that Abram is about to get concerning his seed – his descendants will be slaves and will suffer for hundreds of years before God rescues them. But beyond setting a somber note, this description sets an appropriate mood for someone about to have a dream about meeting God Himself. Throughout the Old Testament we read about those who meet with God and are terrified by the experience. Whether this be Moses, Israel, Jeremiah, or Daniel, when people meet God face to face they normally are terrified.

We might like to think that stepping into God's presence would make us feel happy and cheerful so that we want to jump around for joy. There will undoubtedly be joy in the presence of the Lord, Scripture makes that clear, but there will also be an overwhelming sense of awe and fear at the power and majesty of the

² Calvin, John, and John King. *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010. Page 414.

one who speaks all into existence. Scripture says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and those who see God as He truly is will walk away with fear.

Why do we want to think about joy in the presence of God but not the appropriate fear?

How can we, who will likely not receive a vision of God before we die, learn to have the right kind of fear of God?

The Content of the Covenant (vv 13-16)

Abram had asked how he could really know, and so it is fitting that he begins his speech with the phrase “know for certain.” But the content of that knowledge isn’t all happy news. Abram is told that his children will inherit the land, but only after being slaves in Egypt for many years. God doesn’t hide the truth from Abram, but rather tells Abram what the plan is and gives the rationale. God tells Abram that the iniquity of the Amorites is not full, and it will apparently take at least 400 more years for that to be the case. God is here demonstrating to Abram that He is righteous and just, and that when Israel does receive the land it will not only be the right thing but will be a long time coming.

Why do you think God allowed Abram’s descendants to be slaves? Why not just wandering nomads?

How does this rationale from God help us think about His justice? How might it have impacted Abram?

The Confirmation of the Covenant (v 17-21)

Finally, we read that a torch of fire and a smoking furnace pass through the parts of the animals to seal the covenant that is being made. If we were to compare the Hebrew words here with God’s appearance to Israel to make a covenant with them in Exodus 19-20, we will see a number of important connections. There we read about the mountain smoking as a furnace as fire descends, (Exodus 19:18) and later we will read again about smoke and lightning (Exodus 20:18), and the word for lightning is the same word translated as “torch” in Genesis 15:17. Careful study of these terms will show that fire, smoke, and lightning often accompany divine appearances, but they are especially concentrated in the later part of the story where God shows up to enter a covenant with Israel.³

Why do you think God depicts Himself using fire and smoke here and in Exodus 19-20?

But the key thing to notice here is not so much what God is using to depict Himself, but who it is that walks through the animals. God walks through the animals, but Abram doesn’t. God is promising Abram that He will do what He has said, but Abram must do nothing at this point. This is what we call an unconditional covenant. God has made a covenant with Abram, but Abram doesn’t walk through the animals. Abram has no terms he must keep – it’s all up to God!

³ Mathews, K. A. 2005. *Genesis 11:27–50:26*. Vol. 1B. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers. Page 175-76.

What does this teach us about God and His character?

What other covenants in Scripture are unconditional, that is, what other covenant depend entirely on God and not on man at all?

In the beginning of this section, Abram asked God how he could know for sure that the land would belong to his children. God responded in the most serious way imaginable, by voluntarily binding Himself to a covenant with Abram in which Abram need do nothing. God did not need to do any of this. He could simply have demanded Abram believe and chide him for his lack of faith. But instead, God promised Abram that He would do what He had said He would do, and formalized it in a very human way that Abram would understand.

In a similar way, we as New Testament believers should realize that God is faithful to His Word, and that our hope lies not in our performance but in God's willingness to be faithful to what He has voluntarily bound Himself to. The same God who promised Abram that His descendants would inherit the land is the same God who tells us today that our sins can be forgiven and a home in God's eternal city can be ours through faith. And that covenant with us was initiated, not with a sacrifice of goats and sheep, but with the precious blood of the Son of God. And fortunately for us, God's faithfulness doesn't depend on our perfection. Fortunately for Abram as well, as we will see next week that this man of faith finds a solution to his problem that makes perfect sense to him but spells disaster in the end.