

A Smoking Fire Pot and a Flaming Torch

This morning we began our study of Genesis 15, one of the most beautiful and moving chapters in God's word, and we saw how the Lord sought to encourage and strengthen the faith of Abram by telling him that the Lord was his shield and great reward. As the years had passed and there was still no heir, Abram began to feel discouraged, thinking that his heir would be his servant, Eliezer. So the Lord took Abram by the hand, and gently told him to look up and count the stars of heaven, for your descendants, Abram, will be numbered as the stars. And Abram believed the Lord, and his faith was counted as righteousness. Continuing on in Genesis 15, Moses writes in verses 7-21 [RSV] of Genesis 15,

7. And He said to him, "I am the Lord Who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." 8. But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" 9. He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10. And he brought Him all these, cut them in two, and laid each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. 11. And when birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

12. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram; and lo, a dread and great darkness fell upon him. 13. Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years; 14. but I will bring judgment on the nation which they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15. As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. 16. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

17. When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, 19. the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, 20. the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, 21. the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites."

Without some knowledge of the historical and cultural background, we would be lost in understanding exactly what was transpiring here! What is going on here, anyway? Why are the animals cut in half and arranged in two parallel rows? What is represented by the smoking furnace and flaming torch passing through the corridor between the pieces? And is there meaning to the action of Abraham driving away the birds of prey? What is the meaning of this ceremony?

The context of this beautiful yet unusual chapter is God's covenant with Abraham. In Genesis 12 God initiated an unconditional covenant with Abraham. He then re-affirmed it in chapter 13 after Lot made his worldly choice. In Genesis 15, after Abraham requested a visible sign for ratification of the Lord's promise (verse 8), God conducted a covenant-confirming ceremony with Abraham with a solemn "cutting rite." This ritual for treaty confirmation was common in Abraham's day – in fact, covenants made then were said to be "cut." God's promise of a special land for Abraham's descendants was especially stressed. Both at the beginning (verse 7) and conclusion (verse 18) of the ceremony, God reiterated the covenantal provision of the Promised Land: **"To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates"** (verse 18).

While the covenant ceremony of Genesis 15, with its slain animal corridor, may seem quite unusual to us today, it was not unusual then. As already mentioned, covenant confirmations were normally associated with "cutting rite" ceremonies. In Jeremiah 34:18-20 [RSV], we read, **18. And the men who transgressed My covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant which they made before Me, I will make like the calf which they cut in two and passed between its parts – 19. the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf; 20. and I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives. Their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the Earth.** Here we see that not only passing between the parts of a slain animal was typical practice for confirming or "cutting a covenant," but also we see from verse 20 the essential meaning in such a ceremony. Symbolically, the parties were saying that if either side broke the covenant, they deserved to die like the sacrificial animal or animals.

Now, what about the **"birds of prey"**? In verse 11 we see that birds of prey – most likely crows or ravens or some kind of vulture – came down upon the carcasses of the ceremonial animals, and Abraham had to drive them away. Why did the Holy Spirit include that particular detail in Scripture? Was it just to record the facts of what actually happened, and thus give the account more historical authenticity? There may be a spiritual lesson here for us to appreciate and put into practice, too.

In Scripture, birds sometimes represent satanic activity. In the *Parable of the Sower*, the Lord Himself explained that the birds which ate the seed represented the action of Satan: **"And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown; when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown in them"** (Mark 4:15 [RSV]). The birds of prey in Genesis 15 may be another spiritual picture of satanic activity. These unclean birds attempted to tear and devour the sacrificial animals, the visible part of the sacred covenant-confirming ceremony. God was showing Abram how Satan and his

forces would try and destroy the covenant between Him and Abram and Abram's descendants, and try to keep the prophecies from coming true. Just as Abram had to drive off these evil, unclean birds, so too, would his descendants have to fight the evil forces they encountered. The evil has to be driven away! While God could have prevented the birds from disturbing the ceremony, or driven the vultures away Himself, He gave Abraham the responsibility to care for the visible signs of the covenant.

Is there not an important spiritual lesson for us in this episode? Besides our inheritance in Heaven, God has given us many precious possessions for our present life here on Earth. Satan can never take away the blessings which God has given us unless allowed to do so by God, but he will do all he can to defile the evidence of God's covenant with believers and he will try to divert us from our spiritual commitment with the Lord. Satan will do whatever he can to disrupt and tear apart the sacred things of God.

A little detail that escapes the attention of most people is that the events of Genesis 15 take place in a vision. The vision was not a dream, for Abram was not asleep, but it did contain some dreamlike images. Actually, some of the images are the stuff of nightmares. Verse 12 starts off with **“a dread and great darkness”** falling on Abram while he was in **“a deep sleep”** in this vision. The sun went down. A thick and dreadful darkness came over him. In the darkness Abram could hear his own choked, anxious voice reminding God that he was childless. Abram saw and chased away the vultures, cold-eyed birds of prey wanting to get at the carcasses of his sacrifices. He heard a dismal prophecy from the Lord that his children's children would be slaves for four hundred years. Things were looking dark indeed.

God's first words to Abram in this chapter were, as you may recall, **“Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”** But now as the sun was sinking, a great darkness and dread filled Abram's heart. He was afraid again. Why is that?

Some believe it was simply a natural reaction to being in the presence of God. The normal reaction to an encounter with God, the living God, is one of fear. God is so holy and so awesome that mortal, sinful men can only tremble in His presence. We see this same reaction when Gideon met the Angel of the Lord in Judges 6:22, when Isaiah realized he had seen the King, the Lord Almighty in Isaiah 6:5, and when Zechariah saw the Angel of the Lord in Luke 1:12. These are all true, but I think in the case of Abram in Genesis 15 a better explanation can be found, and that answer lies in verse 13: **“Then the Lord said to Abram, ‘Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years. . . .’”** Abram had experienced in that moment the fear anxiety that was to come upon his descendants who were going to be enslaved for 400 years. But with the fear also came the revelation, the promise, that God would

not desert them, and leave them as orphans. He was going to deliver and reward them, and He was going to punish their captors: “. . . **but I will bring judgment on the nation which they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.**” (Genesis 15:14 [RSV])

We also have to point to the darkness of Abram's own despair. Abram had won a great military victory that had given him the opportunity to take possession of the land of Canaan by military force. He had chosen, however, at the urging of that great priest and king, Melchizedek, not to take the land that way. Instead, he held on to God's promises that he would be the father of a great nation that would inherit the land. Yet nothing seemed to come of that promise. God's words were beginning to sound hollow to Abram because Abram had no child. How would there be a great nation if he and Sarai remained childless? How would the land become his through future generations if he had no descendants?

Abram left his country, his people, and his father's household. He parted company with his nephew. Yes, he had formed a temporary alliance with Mamre, Eshcol, and Aner to defeat the four kings but now he was all alone again. Thanks to Abram, the Canaanites had their land and houses and families and cities again but he had nothing – not even so much as a single small field.

In this light listen to Abram's cry or complaint in verses 2 and 3 again from this morning: **2. But Abram said, “O Lord God, what wilt Thou give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3. And Abram said, “Behold, Thou hast given me no offspring; and a slave born in my house will be my heir.”** It looked to Abram like he had better adopt as his son his servant Eliezer. That seemed to be the only way he would become a great nation and inherit the land. Abram faced the darkness of despair.

Conquering all of this darkness is the unmistakable presence of a light. First of all, we see the light of God's presence. God says, **“Fear not, Abram.”** Then notice what He says: **“I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”** (Genesis 15:1 [RSV]) Now we know why Abram does not have to be afraid. God is his shield. A shield is used by soldiers to protect themselves against the spears, javelins, swords, and arrows of the enemy. Abram's shield is the Lord. Unlike most shields which guard or protect only from the front, the Lord's protection and care is all around Abram. God is his refuge and strength.

And God is his great reward. The King of Sodom offered Abram all of Canaan on a platter. But Abram said no. His reward is the Lord Himself – to know Him and to be known by Him, to love Him and to be loved by Him, to walk with Him and to talk with Him, and to serve Him. Abram's reward after defeating the four kings is not a piece of the Earth but a living, loving relationship with the King of Heaven and Earth!

The light of God's presence is not the only light shining in the darkness that surrounded Abram. God took Abram outside and showed him the light of a host of stars. **“Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. So shall your descendants be”** (Genesis 15:5 [RSV]). Abram would not have to adopt Eliezer as son. A son coming from his own body will be his heir. And his descendants will be as numerous as the stars of heaven! But Abram begs God to reveal Himself more fully to Abram, saying, **“O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?”** (Genesis 15:8 [RSV])

In response the Lord revealed Himself more fully by the strange ceremony that took place between the carcasses of a heifer, a she-goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.

We need to see the ceremony as a covenant ceremony. The ceremony described is one that was commonly used in the ancient Middle East. Animals were cut in half, and the halves were placed opposite each other. The contracting parties in the covenant then passed between the pieces, vowing to keep their word to each other and calling upon themselves the fate of the dead animals if they were to break their word. In other words, they asked to be torn in two like the dead animals if they did not keep their word.

Abram, however, was not required to pass between the animal halves. Instead, in his vision Abram saw a "smoking firepot with a flaming torch" pass between the pieces by itself. That smoking firepot with a blazing torch represents God. So God alone goes through the covenant-making procedure. Abram plays no role in keeping the covenant and its promises. God alone makes the promises. God takes upon Himself the task of fulfilling the duties or obligations of both sides. God alone is the one Who guarantees the covenant promises will be kept.

Think of what this means. It means that from beginning to end the covenant is one of grace. God makes the promises. God gives the guarantee. God puts Himself under a curse, so to speak, if the promises are not kept.

The full significance of what God did for Abram is not really seen until the New Testament. There, in Christ, the covenant of grace reaches its highest expression. In Christ, God keeps the covenant promises and suffers the covenant penalties. For it is Christ Who perfectly obeyed the law in our place and it is Christ Who also bore the curse of the law in our place.

Certainly there is an application in all of this for the Christian. God will fulfill all His promises to us: **“For all the promises of God find their Yes in Him. That is why we utter the Amen through Him, to the glory of God”** (2 Corinthians 1:20 [RSV])! God's covenant promises to us were confirmed by the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. All the animal sacrifices in the Old Testament, including those in this covenant ceremony, pointed forward to the one great sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Those who place their trust in Jesus Christ as Savior are **“qualified . . .**

to share in the inheritance" (Colossians 1:12 [RSV]). God has given us "***an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in Heaven for you***" (1 Peter 1:4 [RSV]). More of God's wonderful promises to us are listed in Ephesians 1:3-14, and these promises are guaranteed to us by the Holy Spirit Himself!

Christian families are under great attack today. The devil's birds of prey are doing their best to break down the family structure that God has set up. Our society and culture are riddled with the destruction wreaked on the family by Satan's "crows," and these demonic forces are constantly devising ways to destroy the Christian home. They must be prevented from entering our homes! They are scavengers of the sacred! Because we live in a post-Christian culture, biblical education in the family is more crucial today than ever. We can expect that family Bible teaching and devotional time is one key area targeted for satanic attack. Unfortunately, Satan's destructive disturbances and distractions have all but destroyed devotional times in many Christian homes. If we are not vigilant to drive away the encroaching vultures, it will not be long before our families are thoroughly secularized – with dire results for our marriages and our children.

How do we drive off the birds of prey? We use the word of God! The word of God is the big stick to use for driving away the birds of prey! As we read and meditate upon Scripture to renew our minds (Romans 12:2), the word of God will transform and protect us from the birds of doubt and deception that desire to ravage our thoughts and our lives. Obedience to the word of God is essential. Many times the birds of prey penetrate the cracks in our homes and churches because we have allowed the values and attitudes of this satanic world system to creep into our thought patterns and lifestyles. If our minds are renewed through the word of God we will be motivated to practice lifestyles that differ radically from this world's lifestyles, and the vultures will be driven away! Furthermore, we must obey the word by practicing the biblical balance of love and discipline in our families and churches. If we do not, the vultures will find a foothold. All too often a lack of discipline – or a lack of love – has provided the unclean birds a sanctuary for destruction within the sacred enclaves of our homes and churches.

Just as Abraham and Sarah were, we, too, are called to leave our attachments to home and family, to our ideas of what religion is or should be, to make God our only loyalty. We are to seek His approval, rather than the approval of those around us. We are called to be a family of God through Whose name nations will bless themselves. We are called to live the intensity of life, as well as the peace of life. We can have the harmony of life when we live with God awareness. We are called to be salt and light to the world, a leaven of peace, through the saving love of God.

Yes, indeed, we are called to a journey of faith. And our faith is and will be reckoned to us as righteousness, just as it was with Abraham, when we rest in the fact that His promises are sure, and His promises are true.