

Genesis 15

Genesis 15 is one of the most important sections of Scripture there is. The Hebrews writer states in the grand Hall of Faith chapter of the Bible, Hebrews 11, his commentary on the great patriarch, Abraham, and his wife, Sarah, saying:

⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. ¹¹By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered Him faithful Who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. (Hebrews 11:8-12 [ESV])

God creates situations where we might gain more faith and so be able to safely incorporate more of His grace into our lives so that His goodness might reach more people. Faith is crucial to this process, not just the initial faith needed but the pursuing faith as well. God could easily have given Abraham a son or many of them. He promised Abram a promise of many descendants, and even after old age had come upon him, Abram was still childless. Surely anyone around at that time who had heard of God's promise to aging Abram of many descendants would laugh and mock him. This was the challenge of his faith that was embedded within his name 'Abram,' meaning 'exalted father.' If people asked the reason Abram lived in Canaan, he would tell them that this was where God would give him a multitude of descendants. Surely we can understand the difficulty Abram went through. But then in Genesis 15 we see God taking him by the hand to comfort and encourage him.

The opening paragraph of Genesis 15 strikingly illustrates for us what is commonly called in Bible study, "the law of first occurrence." By this is meant that the first time a word or phrase is used in the Bible, it is used in such a way or in such a context as to highlight the basic meaning of it throughout the rest of Scripture. Four such phrases appear in this paragraph for the first time in the Bible, though they are repeated many, many times afterward. See if you can recognize them.

¹After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ²But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³And Abram said, "Behold, You have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." ⁴And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not

be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” ⁵***And He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then He said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”*** ⁶***And he believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness.***
(Genesis 15:1-6 [ESV])

Did you catch the first one, in the very first line, ***“the word of the LORD came”***? The recurrence of this phrase many times afterward in Scripture emphasizes the God-breathed character of the Bible. The word of the Lord came to many men, just as it came to Abram, and they wrote as they were borne along by the Holy Spirit, and then actually sat down and studied their own writings to learn what God had said, (1 Peter 1:10-12 RSV). The second phrase is the word that came to Abram, ***“Fear not!”*** How often this is God's word to man, throughout this book. The third phrase is, “I am your shield.” In a thousand wonderful variations, we find this thought repeated frequently: God is our refuge and our strength; God is a tower of refuge; God is an overshadowing rock; blessed is he that hides under the shadow of the Almighty. This is the first intimation of this character of God in Scripture. And then there is that familiar word in the last verse, ***“And he believed the LORD; and He counted it to him as righteousness.”*** The fires of the Reformation were lit from that ringing phrase!

The heart of this passage does not lie in its great phrases, however, but in its connection with the preceding events of Abram's life. God appears to Abram in a vision, but when He comes, His first words are, ***“Fear not!”*** This reveals what is going on in Abram's heart. He was having a sleepless night and the trouble was that he was afraid. Coming, as this incident does, after Abram's return from his battle with the four eastern kings and his encounter with the King of Sodom, we can see why he is so fearful. He is afraid of this man, Chedorlaomer, the great king whom he had conquered. Abram had publicly humiliated him by overthrowing his vast army with but a handful of men. Dictators do not take this kind of treatment lightly!

We can easily understand the justified fear that Abram felt as he faced the possibility of Chedorlaomer's return. No doubt he said to himself, “What have I gotten myself into now? I am almost sorry that I won this battle, for when he comes back what am I going to do? I won't be able to catch him off guard another time.” So fear filled his heart.

Perhaps also there was fear because he had turned down the King of Sodom's offer of a fortune. He did it, of course, in the strength of the fellowship he had enjoyed with Melchizedek. With his heart aflame with the love and grace of God, Abram had said to this king, “I want nothing of all that you have. I don't want you saying that you made Abram rich.” So the king went back to Sodom with all his riches and now Abram was back in his tent, experiencing a very human reaction. After the wealth and luxury of Sodom, that tent must have looked awfully shabby. The wind was howling around it, and the sand was sifting through its cracks.

Doubt began to rise in his heart as to whether he did the right thing or not. And doubt is a form of fear!

If all this sounds familiar to you, take comfort from the fact that it is a very natural reaction and all the great saints of God suffer from it. If there has been a time when you have taken a stand for God in the strength of his grace, supplied to you at that moment, and yet later, you wondered if you did the right thing, that is only what you might expect. In Abram's heart there was this clutching fear as to what would happen when Chedorlaomer came back, along with a probing doubt as to whether he had made a wise decision or played the fool by throwing away the wealth of Sodom.

Still further, deep down in his heart was a lurking loneliness, a gnawing fear that he had somehow misunderstood the promises of God. It had been ten years since God had said to him, "Abram, I am going to give you a son. His descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the Earth, and you shall become the father of many nations." Ten years of waiting had passed. **"Hope deferred makes the heart sick,"** says the proverb (Proverbs 13:12a ESV). The sickness was beginning to creep into his soul a little.

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

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

¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, ¹⁹the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites." (Genesis 15:7-21 [ESV])

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 offspring 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 [ESV], we read, ***¹⁸And the men who transgressed My covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts – ¹⁹the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf. ²⁰And 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 that is sown in them”** (Mark 4:15 [ESV]). 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 **“dreadful 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.

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.

As we look back now from our 21st century vantage point, we can see how God has fulfilled these promises to Abraham to the letter. There is an earthly seed, but there is also a heavenly one, a great uncounted host of spiritual descendants of Abraham, like the stars of the heaven in multitude. Paul says in Galatians 3:7 (RSV), ***“So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham.”*** Do not think you have come to the end of the road when you believe in Jesus Christ and come to Him in obedient, saving faith. You are then standing at the beginning, and every experience of the power of God in your life must come from a fresh appropriation by faith of the promises of God.

The lesson from Genesis 15 is most clear: Abraham would still face a stressful time, but God's promise would hold true. God was testing or proving Abraham's faith. He does this in all of our lives. Are we going to trust the Lord with all of our heart, mind soul and strength, even during our darkest times?