

Genesis 15:1-21

Introduction

If you've been with us over the last few weeks, I hope you're enjoying the time we're spending with Abram. We're following his story in the book of Genesis. And he's on quite an adventure. It began with a promise that God had made to him. It's a staggering promise. It's a promise of descendants and a land. And it reaches its climax with these amazing words: **all peoples on earth will be blessed through you**. Imagine hearing God say that to *you*. What would you think?

And that promise has led Abram on a journey. It started in Ur of the Chaldeans, which was his home. It had taken him from there to Haran, then on to Canaan, down to Egypt where he'd met, and got on the wrong side of, the mighty Pharaoh. Then back to Canaan again, where he separated from his nephew Lot, but then had to go and rescue him from an alliance of four Mesopotamian kings who had taken him captive. It's quite an adventure! And the geography, the names involved, and the sheer amount of time that's passed since these events happened, may leave us feeling far removed from Abram. On the face of it, his life doesn't look anything like our lives today.

Yet we've also seen that Abram is very *easy* to relate to. He's no superhero. He's a flawed human being like each of us. He's made mistakes... and some pretty bad ones too. He's depended on his own logic. He's been dominated by fear. He's used lies and deception. They're the kind of mistakes we make all the time. He's very real. And in our passage this morning, we see another aspect of Abram's character that we may find very easy to relate to. It's his fears, doubts and insecurities. The Abram we meet in Genesis may, in some respects, seem far removed from us. But in other respects, he's not so very different to us at all. As we follow his story, we're learning *with him* what it means to live by faith in the living God. So, I've put as our first heading this morning: Dealing with our fears and doubts. That's our first heading: Dealing with our fears and doubts.

Dealing with our fears and doubts

Please look down again at verse 1.

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:

'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.'

The first two words of verse 1 point us backwards to what has just happened in chapter 14. Abram has just refused the goods the king of Sodom had offered him following the routing of the four kings of Mesopotamia. He had chosen to trust God's promises and make a stand for God. And the first thing God says to him is **'Do not be afraid, Abram...'**

We're not told what Abram was afraid of, but we could guess. Perhaps he was afraid of reprisals from the four kings of Mesopotamia. Had he just made himself a target? Perhaps he was afraid of the king of Sodom, having snubbed the offer he made. Had he just made a powerful enemy?

There are times when I've made a stand as a Christian. Done what I've known to be right. And then afterwards asked myself: What have I just done? Maybe it's the same for you. Perhaps you've spoken up to say you're a Christian in a group of non-Christians, at school or at work. Or declined an invitation to go somewhere or do something that you couldn't in good conscience do as a Christian. Perhaps you've disagreed with something someone's said, because it's contrary to God's word. And then afterwards, you've asked yourself what you've just done. Acting in faith can leave us feeling exposed. We might stand courageously for Christ, but then afterwards the fear creeps in, and we start to worry about the consequences. Have I just harmed my career prospects? Have I just lost a friendship? Have I just made myself a target of bullying or harassment? If you can relate to Abram's fear, then hear God's words of assurance: **'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.'**

To be a shield is to be a source of protection and security. It's an image that would later be used in the psalms. **The Lord is my strength and my shield**, it says in Psalm 28. God wants us to know that we are safe in his care and protection, if only we'll trust him. And he says, **'I am... your very great reward.'** Or **'...your reward will be very great.'** Abram will not lose out on account of his trust in God. There's no need to fear.

But that all seems to cause Abram's pent-up doubts and questions to come to the surface. Look at verse 2.

But Abram said, 'Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, 'You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.'

From where Abram's standing, God's promise of a very great reward seems unlikely at best. God had promised Abram numerous descendants and a land to call home. Yet he's still childless, and a servant may end up inheriting everything. It's one thing to know that God is our shield and our reward. But it can be another thing entirely to *trust* that when his promises of blessing seem so far from being fulfilled. God has promised blessing to all his people. Yet we can be full of doubts and questions when life for us now is so far from being one of blessing. When we're facing challenges and hardships of many kinds, when life is full of pain and struggle, it can be hard to keep trusting that God's promises of blessing will ever come true. Abram's an example for us of how to deal with those doubts and questions. It's not to bottle them up and keep them hidden, but to bring them to God. Pray to him and tell him about them. And when Abram does that, he receives reassurance from God. 'No, a

servant will not be your heir,' God says. Rather, '**...a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.**'

The problem we struggle with is the *delay* in God fulfilling his promises. The longer we stand at a bus stop waiting for a bus to turn up, the more we start to doubt whether it's coming. And the time of waiting was agonisingly long for Abram. He needed reassurance. So God tells him to go outside and look up.

Verse 4.

He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'

God reiterates his promise to Abram with a visual aid that's real and tangible. His descendants will be as numerous as the stars sparkling overhead in the night sky. It's a beautiful way for God to underline his promise. And I think there's an important lesson here that we can easily skip over. When we doubt God's power. When we doubt his ability to do what he has promised. We can look at the world around us. As Abram looked at the numberless stars in the sky, he might have reminded himself that God called each one of them into being with just a word. He set them in their place. If he can do that, then is it going to be a problem for him to give Abram a son, and through him to raise up a whole nation? No, of course not. God's delays are not signs of failure. If God could call into being all that we see around us, then he can certainly deliver on his promises. If he can sustain his creation day after day, guiding the stars on their courses and bringing the changing seasons one after the other, then we need not doubt that he will do all that he has said he will do.

His delays are not signs of failure. Rather, they're opportunities for faith to grow. Think what it meant for Abram. If there was no delay, there would have been no need for faith. If the promise of descendants was accompanied by the immediate announcement that Sarai was pregnant, faith would have been unnecessary. Without delays, there's no need for faith. Delays are an opportunity for faith to grow. And it's this faith that Abram displays in the verses that follow. I've called our next heading: The righteousness that comes by faith.

The righteousness that comes by faith

Please look at verse 6.

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

That's one of the most important verses in the Bible.

Abram was an old man. Sarai was childless. The promise seemed beyond his reach. There was nothing he could do to achieve it. What God had promised seemed impossible. But despite the apparent hopelessness of his circumstances, he believed God. Romans 4, verse 21, says that he was **fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.** He

believed that God can and does keep his promises, even when they seem out of reach. That's faith. And God credited it to him as righteousness.

Abram was declared to be right with God not based on his actions but on account of his faith. It couldn't have been based on his actions because, as we've seen, his actions were far from perfect. And it couldn't have been based on his obedience to God's law, because God's law hadn't been given yet. It would come through Moses many centuries later. Abram was declared to be right with God on account of his faith and his faith alone.

Here's the message that stands at the heart of the Bible. It's not what we do that makes us right with God but faith. It's not going to church, being baptised, or receiving the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper that makes us right with God. We are made right with God through faith alone. Please ask yourself this morning, Do I have such faith? I'm delighted that you're here in church. Perhaps you've been baptised. Perhaps you join us when we share the Lord's Supper. But please don't rely on those things for your standing with God. Please ask yourself this morning, Is my heart right with God? Do I have faith like Abram, that believes God's promises and trusts them?

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

It's through faith that we receive all that God has promised. And in the remaining verses God demonstrates his commitment to his promises, which is our final heading: God's commitment to his promises.

God's commitment to his promises

Look at verse 7.

[God] also said to him, 'I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.'

But Abram said, 'Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it?'

That question's not a sign of unbelief but of a believer wanting help to trust God more deeply. He's like the man who said to Jesus, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!' (Mark 9:24).

Abram still wants reassurance. He's still struggling with doubts and questions. Believing God is not a matter of accepting everything without question. Faith doesn't grow stronger by bypassing the mind. It grows stronger by acknowledging our questions and bringing them honestly to God. And God answers *Abram's* questions by entering a solemn treaty. What happens in the following verses may seem odd to us but it would have been very familiar to Abram as a way of entering a binding covenant. A ceremony such as this was a common feature of life in the Ancient Near East. It would be like drawing up a legal contract for us today. But what's astonishing here is that it's *God* who's binding *himself* in this

covenant. He tells Abram to get five sacrifices, cut each in half and make two heaps. Abram does what he's told and then waits. Even now he's still learning that faith involves waiting on God. Every time a vulture swoops down his faith is tested. Will he let it settle, or will he chase it away and keep waiting on God, no matter how long it may be?

Eventually, the day draws to an end. Abram falls into a deep sleep. And then he's given an outline of what must take place before his descendants will inherit the land. They will first become exiles in a land not their own, in Egypt. They will be oppressed for four hundred years. But then they will emerge with great possessions.

God's making it clear to Abram that he won't possess the land in his own lifetime. The fulfilment of this promise lies far in the future. Instead, he will die in peace and be buried at an old age. His descendants will only come back to the land when the sin of the Amorites, the most powerful tribe in Canaan, has reached its full measure.

That's an important detail. People sometimes accuse the Bible of sanctioning genocide. They claim that Israel's invasion of the promised land was a great injustice. But here God's saying that it would be an act not of *injustice* but of justice. Only when Canaanite sin had reached its limit would Israel be allowed to enter the land. And when they did, the Israelite invasion would be the outworking of divine justice not an act of aggression. They would be instruments of divine judgement. But until then, until it was morally right for God to act in judgement, God's people must wait, even if it cost them centuries of hardship.

When God seems to delay, it's because more things are happening than we are aware of. His timing is always perfect. When he doesn't answer our prayers as we had hoped... when he doesn't fulfil his promises as quickly as we would like... it's then that we need to learn to trust him. That's what Abram's being shown.

And then a smoking furnace of fire appears and passes through the pieces. It symbolises the presence of the living God. Now, if this was a human treaty, both parties would have passed between the heaps of dead sacrifices. In effect, they would be saying, 'If I don't keep my end of the bargain, may I become like these animals.' But on this occasion, it's God alone who passes between them. In this covenant, there are no conditions for Abram to fulfil. God alone takes upon himself responsibility for seeing that the covenant promises are fulfilled. It's a covenant of grace. And we're told in verse 18: **On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land...'**

Remember Abram's question: How can I know that I shall gain possession of the land? God's expressing his total commitment to his promises in a way that gives Abram certainty. There's nothing for Abram to contribute. The land will be a gift of grace. Abram just needs to trust what God has promised and enjoy it.

And in the New Testament, in Romans chapter 4, Paul says something astonishing about what's happening here in Genesis. In verse 13, he says this: **It was not through the law that**

Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.

Rewind that and notice what Paul says. He says that **Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be... heir of the world...**

That's not what God says in Genesis. God says that he would give Abram's descendants **this land...** the promised land. But Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, sees a much bigger promise here. The land is a foretaste of a much bigger inheritance for all God's people – not just a strip of land but the whole earth. And this inheritance is for *us*, for people of all nations who trust in Christ. In Galatians 3, verse 29, Paul writes: **If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.**

One day, when the sin of the world has reached its full measure, far beyond that of the Amorites, Christ will return. On that day, God will bring justice to the world. He will bring all sin and evil under judgement. And on that day, the world will be taken out of the hands of evil men and be delivered into the hands of his people. We will live with Christ forever, in a new heaven and a new earth.

It's a glorious inheritance, secured through Christ's death on a cross. It's being kept for us in heaven, and we're being kept for it. And it will come. But we're not there yet. For us too, faith involves waiting on God. While we wait, we will go through trials and hardships. But our inheritance will come!

When we have fears and doubts. When we have questions and need reassurance. We can look back to God's covenant with our forefather Abram. A one-sided covenant which has the force of the most secure legal contract today. A covenant of grace in which God bound himself to fulfil his promises – promises of which we are heirs in Christ. And we can look forward with confidence to the glorious future that God has guaranteed for all his people. A future in a new heaven and a new earth.

It's when we look *back and forward* like this, that we can be assured of God's care of us today, in the present. And it's when we look *back and forward* like this that we can make a stand for him... at work, at school or at home... with confidence... knowing that we needn't be afraid, because he is our shield, and our very great reward.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for all your good promises, promises of a glorious inheritance which is a gift of grace, received through faith. Please help us to keep trusting you as we wait for our inheritance to come. And as we stand for you in the world, please strengthen us in the knowledge that you are with us. And that you are our shield, and our very great reward. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.