

Genesis 15 – God’s Covenant with Abram

Review

Last time, we looked at Abram’s rescue of Lot after he was taken prisoner following the battle in the Valley of Siddim between the armies of Chedorlaomer and the five kings of the cities of the valley. We then discussed the encounter between Abram and Melchizedek – King of Salem and priest of God Most High. We examined the symbolism surrounding this encounter and looked at some scriptures (Psalm 110 and Hebrews 6-7) which support the idea that Melchizedek’s appearance to Abram was a pre-incarnate manifestation of Jesus.

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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 [אליעזר 'ēli'ezer – God is help] 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.” ⁵And 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.” ⁶And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. Genesis 15:1-6 (ESV)

Genesis 15:1 begins with “*After these things...*” referring to Abram’s rescue of Lot and his meeting with Melchizedek. In God’s Word, we find Him appearing to people in several different ways. A vision differs from a dream in that the person to whom God appears in a dream is asleep while those to whom He appears in a vision or in person as He did to Adam and Eve, Abram, and others throughout His Word are awake. Visions however differ from personal appearances such as when the “Commander of the Army of the LORD” appeared to Joshua in Joshua 5. When a person has a vision of God, s/he enters a spiritual state in the presence of God somewhat different from ordinary wakefulness. Having never yet had such a vision myself, I can’t really describe such an extraordinary spiritual state except to simply say that people having visions enter it. We find instances of God appearing to some of the prophets in this way just as He appeared to Abram here in Genesis 15.

As we shall soon see, God was about to establish a covenant with Abram. Recall that such covenants usually consist of a promise from God, a commandment given by God to the person or people with whom He is making the covenant, and some kind of formalizing symbol or ceremony as a reminder to all concerned of the covenant into which they have entered. Here in Genesis 15, God’s promise is to bring forth a great nation to be born from Abram’s own son.

Of course, it goes without saying that Abram was unable to number the stars. God promised to make Abram’s descendants just as innumerable. Remember also that Abram was quite prosperous. He had no need of any earthly reward from God. Abram’s response to God’s promise of a great reward was straightforward and quite poignant. Abram’s greatest desire had been for an heir to carry on his family name and prosperity. Yet Abram didn’t really think this would be possible in his old age. But God promised Abram that indeed he would be given the son he wanted. Furthermore, God told Abram that this promised son’s offspring would become a great nation – many more than Abram could possibly number.

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Genesis 15:6 is one of the key verses in all of God’s word. It is worthy of repeating...

6And he [Abram] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. Genesis 15:6 (ESV)

Abram had no way to understand how God would fulfill this promise, yet Abram believed God could and would do so. Because of his faith, God credited Abram with righteousness. The righteousness we read about wasn’t Abram’s own. Like us, Abram **had no** righteousness of his own. The righteousness God granted to Abram was God’s alone – given freely by God’s grace as God’s response to Abram’s faith. God’s imputation of His righteousness upon people in response to their faith is the great overarching theme of God’s Word. God has accomplished this miraculous transformation in people’s hearts by the birth, sinless life, death, resurrection, and promised return of Jesus – God the Son – for any who will believe this Gospel and declare His lordship over us. Here in our study of Genesis, we can’t devote the time to fully explore what God’s Word teaches about God’s substitutionary imputation of righteousness upon us in response to faith. For now, let’s just look at a few examples.

In our [previous study](#) we saw that Melchizedek the King of Salem and priest of God Most High met Abram at Salem (later Jerusalem) following Abram’s rescue of his nephew Lot from the forces of Chedorlaomer. Recall that Melchizedek’s name מֶלְכִי־צֶדֶק **malkî-ṣedeq** means king of righteousness or justice. Of course, Jesus is also called the LORD of our Righteousness - יהוה צדקנו - **Y’hōvâ ṣedeq**.

5“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 6In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness [יהוה צדקנו - **Y’hōvâ ṣedeq**].”⁷ Jeremiah 23:5-6 (ESV)

Clearly, this prophecy identifies the future (in Jeremiah’s day) מָשִׁיחַ **māšîaḥ** – the righteous Branch of David whom the Lord promised to raise up – as the very source of true righteousness and justice. Furthermore, Jeremiah’s prophecy identifies Jesus the מָשִׁיחַ **māšîaḥ** as a manifestation or aspect of God who gave His Name – יהוה **Y’hōvâ** – to Moses from the burning bush.

David himself alluded to this gift of righteousness which comes from God in His response to our faith.

***3Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
4He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false
and does not swear deceitfully.
5He will receive blessing from the LORD
and righteousness from the God of his salvation.*** Psalm 24:3-5 (ESV)

The prophet Isaiah likened God’s gift of righteousness to a beautiful garment.

***10I will greatly rejoice in the LORD;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,***

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and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. Isaiah 61:10 (ESV)

The apostle Paul wrote extensively about this concept of substitutionary righteousness. Paul wrote of his own hope in this regard in his letter to the church at Philippi.

⁸Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Philippians 3:8-11 (ESV)

We could spend a lifetime delving further into this concept of righteousness granted by God in response to faith. But for now, we need to press forward in our study of Genesis.

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. Genesis 15:7-11 (ESV)

Here God expands on His promise to bring Abram a son of his own as his heir by reiterating the promise He made when Abram first came into Canaan to give the land to Abram’s offspring. Although here in Genesis 15:7 God promised to give the land to Abram, He will fulfill that promise through Abram’s offspring as we shall see.

ASIDE – As we have previously mentioned, Israel has never yet fully possessed the Land of Promise. For now, suffice it to say that God *always* fulfills His promises so the remnant of Israel continues to look forward to the day they will receive their full inheritance here on earth, and God looks forward to the day when Israel will receive their full eternal inheritance through faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ – Israel’s promised מָשִׁיחַ *māšīah*.

God’s response to Abram’s question how he would know that God would fulfill these promises may seem a little odd. Covenants were often formalized with a ceremony involving animal sacrifices. The idea was that each participant in this “cutting” of a covenant would first pass between the two halves of the covenant sacrifices which symbolized the promises given by each party to the other(s). Then each party would offer his part of the sacrifices to God. Thus, God Himself would become a witness to the covenant. Here in this passage, we find the first instance in God’s Word of a covenant being formalized in this way.

NOTE – The culminating covenant between God and mankind was also formalized by sacrifice. Jesus offered His own body and blood on the cross to establish this ultimate covenant – God’s promise of eternal life to any who believe in Jesus’ resurrection and call upon Jesus’ Name as our Lord. Jesus

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declared this new covenant at the Passover meal in the upper room on the evening before He offered Himself to establish it.

***14**And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. **15**And he said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. **16**For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” **17**And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, “Take this, and divide it among yourselves. **18**For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” **19**And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” **20**And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” Luke 22:14-20 (ESV)*

***12**As the sun was going down, a deep sleep [תַּרְדֵּמָה *tardēmâ*] fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful [אֵימָה *'émâ*] and great darkness fell upon him. **13**Then 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. **14**But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. **15**As for you, 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.” Genesis 15:12-16 (ESV)*

Frankly, I find this passage somewhat disturbing. In all honesty, I must say this “prophecy” uttered by God to Abram while he slept and its perfect fulfillment through God’s rescue of the Israelites from their 400-year Egyptian captivity under the leadership of none other than Moses (the purported writer of Genesis) as we read in the book of Exodus seems to me just a little bit too convenient!

In my mind, the passage raises some uncomfortable questions:

1. Since Abram died hundreds of years before Moses was born, how could Moses possibly know what God spoke to Abram while he slept?
2. For that matter, how could Abram himself have known what God said to him in this deep sleep we read about?

Let’s tackle the second question first. Perhaps Abram wasn’t truly sleeping but had entered the trance state often associated with people’s visions of God. In fact, the Hebrew word תַּרְדֵּמָה *tardēmâ* translated as “deep sleep” in practically every English language translation can also mean “trance.” God’s Word speaks about many instances of people being “carried in the Spirit” or being shown visions “in the Spirit.” For example...

- God carried Ezekiel in a vision to a valley full of dry bones (Ezekiel 37).
- Daniel the prophet was carried to Persia (Elam) and shown a prophetic vision of things (then) yet to come. Afterward, Gabriel the angel appeared to Daniel and explained the vision (Daniel 8).

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- The apostle Paul was caught up to “the third heaven” where he saw things that could not be described in human words (2 Corinthians 12:2).
- John the apostle was commanded to “Come up here...” to the throne room of Heaven where he was shown a vision of the things to come (Revelation 4).

So, despite the **תַּרְדֵּמָה** *tardēmâ* into which Abram fell as the sun was setting on this day described in Genesis 15, he may have been aware of his situation well enough to later describe the formalization of this covenant and God’s prophecy concerning the Israelites’ Egyptian captivity that God proclaimed to him that evening.

But how did Moses hear about it? This was certainly an extraordinary experience for Abram even among the many extraordinary experiences of his life. It was so memorable that Abram may well have repeated the story to his descendants many times so that it eventually became an oral tradition handed down over the centuries until Moses eventually heard it and wrote it down.

Another possibility is that God Himself told Moses the story while they were together for many weeks on Mt Sinai (Exodus 24) or at some other time during Moses’ life. Moses’ relationship with God was quite extraordinary. Starting with his encounter with God at the burning bush (Exodus 3), we see Moses continually interacting with God personally. Moses himself wrote in Exodus 33:11, “...*the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.*” Thus, it should come as no surprise that God told Moses about this covenant He had made with Abram that Moses wrote about here in Genesis 15. Perhaps God even commanded Moses to write the prophecy down as part of his narrative.

In Genesis 15:12 we read that this **תַּרְדֵּמָה** *tardēmâ* into which Abram fell was dreadful. Other translations render the Hebrew **אִימָה** *'êmâ* in this verse as terror or horror. Why did this vision frighten Abram so? Was it the prospect of his descendants’ affliction and servitude? We can assume that Abram believed God’s prophecy. After all isn’t this the same Abram to whom his belief had been credited as righteousness? Or was Abram’s dread rooted in something else? We can only speculate. God’s Word gives us no further illumination about it.

The statement in Genesis 15:16 that “...*the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.*” seems out of place here but relates to the prophecy of Genesis 15:13-14. In our study of the [Table of Nations in Genesis 10](#), we learned that the Amorites were descended from Ham’s Son Canaan who was the progenitor of many of the peoples dwelling in the land when Abram first arrived there, (see the [Descendants of Ham Map](#)). Recall also from our [study of Genesis 14](#) that the Amorites were living in the mountains west of the Dead Sea when Abram rescued Lot from the armies of Chedorlaomer. Very likely they were still living in that area when God appeared to Abram in this vision.

But by the time the Israelites returned from their 400-year sojourn in Egypt prophesied here in Genesis 15:13-14 and their subsequent 40-year wandering in the wilderness of Sinai, the Amorites were living on the east side of the Jordan and the Dead Sea north of the River Arnon’s inflow into the Dead Sea and south of the River Jabbok’s inflow into the Jordan. Look at the [Journey from the Wilderness to Canaan Map](#). The land of the Amorites is labeled Sihon (after their king at the time of the Israelites’ return) and shown on this map in green.

In Deuteronomy 2, Moses relates the story of the wilderness wandering following the Israelites’ refusal to obey God’s command to go up from Sinai and settle Canaan. God commanded Moses to refrain from battle with the people of Seir, Moab, and Ammon but told Moses He would give Sihon

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the Amorite, king of Heshbon into Israel’s hand (Deuteronomy 2:1-25). Israel’s defeat of the Amorites at Jahaz detailed in Numbers 21:21-32 finally brought the iniquity of the Amorites to an end as prophesied in Genesis 15:16.

NOTE – There is a typo on the [Journey from the Wilderness to Canaan Map](#). The caption for the battle at Jahaz should read “Num 21:21-32.”



Madaba Map Jerusalem Detail

dating from about 550 AD. The map is annotated in Greek and depicts many aspects of the eastern Mediterranean region including the Jordan River, the Dead Sea, and the city of Jerusalem as it was at the time the map was created. The map was rediscovered and partially preserved during the building of a new church on the site in the late 1800s. The map contains depictions of parts of Jerusalem which remained unknown until the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem was excavated after 1967’s Six-day War.

ASIDE – Numbers 21:30 describes the fire from the Israelite victory against Sihon spreading as far as Medeba. Today, the city of Madaba, Jordan is famed for its stone mosaic art. The city is home to the Madaba Institute for Mosaic Art & Restoration – a school dedicated to training students in creating stone mosaics and restoring ancient stone mosaic archaeological relics. Many of the graduates of this school suffer from physical disabilities that would preclude them from employment in most occupations. The floor of the church of Saint George in Madaba contains the remnant of a stone mosaic map

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 15:17-21 (ESV)

As we previously mentioned, usually when a covenant was formalized through this ceremony of “cutting” the covenant, both parties entering into the agreement passed between the halves of the sacrificial animals before offering them to God as evidence of Him witnessing the covenant. Of course, that tradition couldn’t apply in this case because God Himself was one of the parties to the covenant. Furthermore, Abram had been in the deep sleep – תרדמא *tardēmâ* – described in Genesis 15:12 since before the sun fully set, so he couldn’t pass between the halves of the offerings either. Therefore, the smoking fire pot (תנור *tannûr* – furnace, oven, or fire pot) and the flaming torch symbolize God’s and Abram’s roles in the covenant cutting ceremony.

For His part, God reiterated His promise to give Abram’s descendants all the land from the Nile River (the river of Egypt) to the Euphrates, then listing some of the occupants of the land in Abram’s time. As we have mentioned, Abram’s descendants – the nation of Israel – have yet to possess this entire space which includes half of Egypt, Lebanon, all the present-day state of Israel (including the

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“occupied territories”), all of Jordan, much of Syria, half of Iraq, and part of Saudi Arabia! Yet we read here in Genesis 15:18-21 that God promised all this land to Abram’s descendants. Furthermore, we know and trust that God *always* fulfills His promises. Therefore, His fulfillment of this promise to Abram must still be in the future. It is truly tragic that most people in the world today and even most of today’s Israelis no longer believe this promise (if they *ever* truly did).

So, what exactly was Abram’s part of the “deal?” We find the answer in Genesis 15:6 – “...*he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*” In this, we see that God’s covenant with Abram recounted here in this passage is a model of the New Covenant in Jesus’ blood! Just as Abram’s part in God’s covenant was simply to believe God’s promise to make his descendants a great nation, so our part as Christians in the New Covenant established by Jesus’ sacrifice of His own body and the shedding of His own blood on the cross is simply to believe in His promise of eternal life.

²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. John 5:24 (ESV)

Looking Ahead

Next time, God willing, we’ll look at the story of Abram and Hagar – Sarai’s Egyptian maid servant.