

Know for Certain...

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[0 : 00] For a short while I'd like us to turn back to the chapter that we read in Genesis 15. We'll look at the whole chapter, but let's read again at verse 17.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking firepot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham.

In our evening services we are doing a short study into the life of Abraham. Two weeks ago we were looking at Genesis chapter 12, which in many ways is a key chapter in the whole of the Bible. In that chapter God comes to Abraham with an amazing promise. He says that he's going to bless Abraham. He's going to make his family into a great nation and through that nation all the nations of the earth are going to be blessed.

In many ways that promise of Genesis 12 is page one of God's plan of salvation. Humanity which has been left broken by sin is going to be restored and that work of restoration is going to be worked out through Abraham.

[1 : 14] God initiates a plan of salvation and that plan of salvation is going to be worked out across the ages of history and at the heart of that plan is family.

Through Abraham's family God is going to bless every family. So in the midst of all the mess that sin has caused God sees humanity pushing him away but God's great goal is to go after them and bring them back.

So God is going to work out his purposes through Abraham. And so at that page one in Genesis 12 God makes this great promise that Abraham's going to become a great nation.

He's going to be blessed and he'll be a blessing and it all sounds so exciting. And you go on into chapters 13 and 14 of Genesis and you can see that things start to look really good for Abraham. He settles in the land that God has promised. He becomes prosperous, his herds are growing and growing and he becomes quite powerful. In chapter 14 some enemy kings come and take his nephew hostage but Abraham is able to go and defeat them and bring Lot his nephew back from captivity.

[2 : 34] Everything is looking good for Abraham. But as time goes on there is still one massive problem.

Abraham and Sarah remain childless. And this is the dilemma that Abraham faces at the start of chapter 15. God comes to him and says fear not, I am your shield, you shall, your reward shall be very great.

But Abraham says what's going to happen to me? I'm still childless. And my servant Eliezer is going to inherit all of my possessions.

The promise of offspring doesn't seem to be materializing. But in response to that God reassures Abraham with a great promise.

He says this man Eliezer, he's not going to be your heir. Your very own son will be your heir. And then he takes Abraham outside and he says look up to heaven and count the stars if you can and that's what your offspring is going to be like.

[3 : 40] And in response to that we have this amazing description of Abraham's faith. He believed the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness.

And these words are a great reminder that the right response to a promise is trust. But we must never, ever forget that that is the response that God is looking for in all of us.

Many religions in the world are based on requirements. But Christianity isn't. Christianity is not based on requirements, it is based on promises.

And the difference is crucial because requirements need to be met. Promises need to be trusted.

That's why Christianity is not a message of salvation through meeting requirements. It's a message of salvation through faith in the promises that God has made to us.

[4 : 42] But then Abraham asks a crucial question in verse eight. He says how am I to know, how am I to know that all of this is going to happen?

And then in response to that we have this fascinating account of animals being cut in half and this smoking firepot and flaming torch, all of which culminates in God making a covenant with Abraham. And really that's what this passage is all about. God's covenant with Abraham. Now maybe, I'm not sure if I should maybe say this, maybe this is a wee bit controversial, but I'm going to say that this chapter I think is possibly the strangest passage in the whole of the Old Testament.

But what I hope that we're going to see is that at the same time it is also the coolest passage in the Old Testament. And I want us just to look at it together tonight by asking four or five questions. First question we have to ask is what is actually going on in Genesis 15? Let's read again from verse nine.

[6 : 07] God says to Abraham, bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old and a ram three years old, a turtle dove and a young pigeon. And he brought all of these, cut them in half and laid each half over against the other.

And he did not cut the birds in half. And when the birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abraham drove them away. Now, one of the fascinating things in any part of life is how in different cultures, things work in different ways.

And whenever you go to a different culture, it's really important that you are aware of cultural habits in order to properly understand the people that we interact with and the different things that we might see in that culture.

And we can see lots of different examples of that in life. I can remember being with some Americans and they were speaking, I think, about a car. And one of them said, oh, man, that's so bad.

It's nasty. And what he meant was that it's a really nice car. Another example is from where I come from in the Isle of Lewis, where if someone asks you, do you want a cup of tea?

[7 : 20] And you say, oh, no. That actually means yes. And the kettle will be on before you know it. And I'm sure you can think of lots of examples yourself.

All of these show that if you are not familiar with a culture, then something can look very strange. But if you are familiar with a culture, then the strange thing that you are looking at makes perfect sense.

Genesis 15 is a prime example of this. To us, the whole thing looks a wee bit strange. But if you showed Genesis 15 to an Old Testament Israelite or to anyone from the ancient Near East, they would immediately say, oh, I know what that's talking about.

It's a covenant ratification ceremony. What does that mean? Well, in the ancient Near East, back in the area that Abraham was in and the surrounding region at that time, it was common for covenants to be made, especially between rulers.

And we see a similar thing today, but we would call it a treaty where nations or groups of nations enter into agreement with one another. That was common back in the ancient Near East.

[8 : 40] And when one of these covenants was made, there was a special ceremony conducted to mark the formalization of that covenant.

They took animals, they killed them, they cut them in half and set them opposite each other, and to seal the covenant, both parties or representatives of both parties walked through the middle of the divided animals.

I've got a wee diagram here just to give you the idea. If you imagine that the red semicircles are animals cut into it, well, maybe you don't imagine it too much, but you know what I mean.

You have these divided animals set across from each other and the two parties walk through the middle to seal the covenant.

And the whole point of it was to say, if I break this covenant, then may I be made like one of these animals.

[9 : 45] In other words, it was a pledge to death. The result of all that was that they were committing to one another in a covenant bond, and that would bring blessings if everyone stuck to the terms of that covenant.

It would benefit both parties, but to break the covenant would bring consequences. It would provoke a curse. And later on in the Old Testament, there's actually a very clear example of this in Genesis chapter 34.

This was where the people of Judah had covenanted to free slaves according to what God had commanded. And they did that, but then they went back on their word and they put the people that they'd released back into slavery.

And in response to that, God comes to them and he says, you've not obeyed me. I asked you to proclaim liberty. You haven't done that.

And you have taken the people who you freed back into captivity. 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 into and passed between its parts.

[11:13] It's the officials, the leaders, the priests, the people, everyone who passed through the parts, I'll give them into the hand of their enemies, their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.

That's talking about the same thing, this solemn commitment to keep your word and your pledge in yourself to death that you will keep that word no matter what.

That's what's been described for us in Genesis 15. It's a covenant ratification ceremony. God enters a covenant bond with Abraham and his descendants.

Now, the next question that we need to ask in all of this is to say, well, what exactly do we mean by covenant? Now, this is a big topic and in many ways it's one of the most amazing topics that we can consider.

But it's important just to try to make sure that we don't overcomplicate it because really it's quite simple. A covenant is just a relationship of the utmost commitment.

[12:27] It's got four basic elements. There's the bond, the relationship between two parties.

There's the terms of that relationship. So there's certain things that are acceptable, certain things that are unacceptable and these are to be consistently maintained.

There's blessings from being in that relationship and there's curses or consequences for breaking that bond. A great example of a covenant is marriage.

Two people enter into a relationship of the utmost commitment. There's terms that shape that relationship, terms of duty and love and loyalty and faithfulness.

There's blessings from sticking to those covenant terms and supporting one another as husband and wife and there are curses and problems and consequences if one or other neglects their responsibilities or breaks the relationship that they've entered into.

Marriage is a good example of a covenant. However, there's one crucial difference. In a marriage, both parties are equal, the man and the woman.

[13:39] In a covenant relationship with God, it's not two equals. It's God and humanity and so therefore there is what we call a superior, inferior relationship.

God is the superior, we are the inferior. Now that's not to sort of say that superior, inferior means like the idea of oppression or unfairness. It's rather pointing to the fact that God is so much greater than we are.

We can't claim to deserve to be in a relationship with Him, but in His grace and love, He comes down to our level and initiates and administers a covenant bond so that we can have a relationship with Him.

The Bible's great summary statement of this covenant relationship is where it says again and again and again, God comes to us and says, I am your God and you are my people.

Now, it's important to understand this concept of covenant and to recognize it because God is a God who likes covenant. Throughout all the Bible, God is 100% committed to His people and again and again and again we see the scriptures refer back to God's covenant.

[15:03] Going on from the life of Abraham, you come to the Exodus where the people, the descendants of Abraham are in Egypt and are suffering. God hears their groaning and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and with Jacob.

When they entered into the promised land, we see the same thing. The angel of the Lord went up from Gilgall to Bochum and said, I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give your fathers.

I said, I will never break my covenant with you. It's repeated again in the days of the kingdom of Israel. They were oppressed, but God was gracious to them.

He had compassion on them. He turned towards them because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And even in the exile towards the end of the Old Testament period, we have the same language where God remembered His covenant with His people.

The Bible is in many ways all about God's covenant dealings with His people. The next question I want to ask is, what does this teach us about God?

[16:12] Well, there's two key concepts that this whole idea of covenant brings before us, and they are grace and truth.

So at the heart of covenant, you have truth. Covenants are reminded that God is a God of truth, a God of order and of consistency. And so when God makes a covenant promise, He absolutely keeps it.

Now that's in total contrast to all the pagan gods of the other nations in the Old Testament. These gods were unpredictable. They were often conflicting, and in the whole kind of religious mindset of these people, they never knew what their gods were going to do next.

The God of the Bible is not like that. He is clear and consistent. He's made a covenant to be our God, and He will stick to it.

He will never break it. So covenant is reminding us that God is true. He never lies. He never changes his mind. He never breaks a promise. And in a world that's full of spin and fake news and half truths, God's commitment to truth and His commitment to be true to His covenant is so different and so precious.

[17:40] At the heart of covenant is truth, but also at the heart of covenant is grace. That reminds us that God is a God of kindness, love, and grace.

And we see that throughout the Bible, God's covenantal dealings with His people are motivated by His deep, deep love and kindness towards them.

And in fact, there's a special word that the Bible uses to describe that. It's a Hebrew word, the word Hezad. And we see it in the verse that we read at the start of our service.

We know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him. That word's actually a very hard word to translate.

I'm told that when the revised standard version of the Bible was being put together, this was the very last word that they translated because it's hard to capture the fullness of it in English.

[18:41] Sometimes it's translated steadfast love, sometimes loving kindness, sometimes goodness, sometimes unfailing love. The emphasis behind the word is that it expresses an inner love and commitment that then motivates action to care for and benefit someone with whom you have a relationship.

In other words, it's not just a love that feels, it's a love that does. It is a committed, deep covenant love.

And this whole biblical concept of covenant is reminding us that God loves us and He acts graciously towards us.

So throughout the Old Testament, you have this constant emphasis on covenant. At the heart of that covenant are these two concepts, grace and truth. And then when you come into the New Testament, what does John tell us about Jesus in the first chapter of his gospel?

He says, the word became flesh and dwelt among us. We've seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of what? Full of grace and truth.

[19:55] God's plan of salvation is grounded on covenant. And the fulfillment of that is in the coming of Jesus. When Jesus comes, he shows us this covenant, grace and truth and everything fits together perfectly.

The truth and grace of God's covenant means that God will keep true to His word and He will step into action on our behalf.

But what exactly is God going to do? Well, that's our next question and the answer is all the way back in Genesis 15.

There we read that the sun came down and a deep sleep fell on Abraham, a great and dreadful darkness. God comes to him and speaks, says, no for certain, your offspring will be soldiers in the land.

They'll be afflicted. I'll bring judgment on that nation and after they'll, words, they'll come out. As for you, you will go to your father's in peace and be buried in a good old age.

[21 : 01] They'll come back here in the fourth generation for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. And then we have these words in verse 17, when the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

Now, what is going on here? Well, remember, we said that in a covenant ratification ceremony, both parties walk through the separated animal halves.

Both parties make a commitment to say that if I break this, then I am invoking the curse of a broken covenant onto myself.

Both parties go through the pieces. But that's not what happens in Genesis 15. In Genesis 15, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch pass through the pieces.

What is going on? Well, the smoke and the fire is representing God. A bit like the pillar of cloud and fire that displayed God's presence as his people came out of Egypt in the book of Exodus.

[22 : 31] This is a representation of God himself. And so the key point is that as this flame passes through the pieces, it's showing us that only God is passing through these pieces as this covenant is ratified.

And the crucial implication of that is that God is taking upon himself all of the responsibility if this covenant is broken.

Now, the rest of the Old Testament is a repeated account of God's people breaking this covenant. Even Abraham in the next chapter makes a massive mistake and mucks things up. And throughout the Old Testament, again and again, the people turned away from God's covenant. But God constantly remained faithful.

And even though the people broke God's covenant, and even though we break and ruin our relationship, with God through sin, we do not bear the ultimate curse of the broken covenant.

[23 : 49] But the crucial point is that the covenant curse does not disappear. Remember covenant is a matter of life and death. And the curse of death in a broken covenant is inescapable.

But the amazing thing is that the person in Genesis 15 who says, I'll take the curse is not Abraham. It's God. And you ask, well, how can the curse be placed on God?

And the answer is that it was placed on God when Jesus died on the cross. And we go all the way forward into the New Testament to the letter to Galatians where Paul explains this beautifully and says, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

And then he immediately links it all the way back to Abraham. He says, for it's written, cursed is everyone who's hanged on a tree so that in Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles so that we might receive the promised spirit through faith.

[25 : 14] Genesis 15 is telling us that God has made a covenant with those who trust him. But in that covenant, he will take the curse of failure and disobedience upon himself.

And that curse was born by God himself. When Jesus Christ, God the Son, died on the cross. Jesus's death fulfills all that God's covenant with Abraham spoke about.

And in the cross of Jesus Christ, all the Old Testament governments are fulfilled. That's why it's no surprise that when Jesus spoke about his sacrificial death at the First Lord's Supper, he said, this is the new covenant.

This is the fulfillment of all these covenants. This is the new covenant in my blood.

God is entering a covenant relationship with humanity. But he's saying, if it goes wrong, I'll carry the cost.

[26 : 26] The last question is, what does all this mean for you? Well, there's three things I want to say very briefly. The first is that God wants you to know this.

In verse 13, God says to Abraham, no for certain. And that's a brilliant phrase. It's telling us that this whole strange covenant ratification ceremony, this pledge to death, this remarkable vision and event that we have in Genesis 15.

This is a demonstration of God's grace and truth so that Abraham and you and I would know for certain that God has come to rescue humanity.

God wants you to know that he has made this commitment. God wants you to know that he will keep us covenant. God wants you to know that this is not blind religious optimism.

This is not a stab in the dark. This is covenant commitment from God that you can be absolutely certain of. God wants you to know this.

[27 : 34] And it also tells us that God wants you to be safe. That's the remarkable thing that the fact that only the smoking fire pot passes through the pieces is amazing, not just because God exposes himself to the danger of the curse, but also because Abraham doesn't go through it.

In other words, Abraham is protected from the curse. God is keeping him safe. And it's reminding us that one of the key things that God wants for you is that you will be safe.

And one of the desperate effects of sin is that it constantly exposes us to danger. But God's great goal is to rescue you from that danger and to keep you safe forever.

Genesis 15 is telling you that God will carry the curse so that you cannot be lost. And that's because God wants you to be safe.

So Genesis 15 is saying God wants you to know this. Genesis 15 is saying that God wants you to be safe. But above all else, Genesis 15 is telling us that God wants you.

[28 : 49] And that's the rule stop. This chapter is telling us and telling you that God has an astonishingly deep, strong life and death commitment to you.

It tells you that God will be absolutely true to that. He will never break this promise. He'll never be inconsistent. You can totally and utterly rely on him.

God cannot lie. He cannot be inconsistent. So when God commits to you, which he has, he's placing himself in a situation that he cannot get out of. So it's not just that God won't give up on you. He cannot give up on you. And he knew that he couldn't back out of it when he committed to you in the first place. And all of that is for one simple reason.

To God, you are worth it. God's love for you set him on a path that takes him from heaven to the cross.

[29 : 58] From the very beginning, God knew that loving you would come at a massive cost. When God passed through those pieces in Genesis 15, he knew exactly what that meant in terms of the cross and all its implications.

But from Genesis 15 to Calvary, God is saying, you are worth it. I will carry the cost.

To Jesus, you are worth a pledge to death. And all of that is because God wants you.

One very last question though is this. What is Abraham doing in it all? And the answer is that he's asleep.

While God pledged himself to death, Abraham lay still. Now, maybe I'm stretching things a wee bit.

[31 : 15] Maybe not. But I do think that there's actually a really powerful point here for us. I think it's reminding us that while Jesus goes to the cross, while he carries out curse, while he rescues us from sin, while he carries every burden, fulfills every requirement and goes to the absolute limit of suffering, while he fulfills this pledge to death, we just lie still and he does it all.

And that's how you can know that you will be safe because he does it. That's how you can know how precious you are because he actually does it.

And that's why this is not the strangest passage in the Old Testament. It is the coolest passage in the Old Testament because it tells us just how much God is willing to do for you.

And that's why if you want to become a Christian, there isn't this massive list of requirements that you have to meet. All you have to do is fall into God's arms, close your eyes and rest in him.

Amen. Let us pray. Father, we thank you so much for what this chapter reveals to us, showing us your willingness to take the consequence of all our failings onto yourself.

[33 : 06] We thank you so, so much for your amazing, covenant love towards us. And we pray that for every one of us, that we would just fall into your arms and rest there forever.

Amen. Amen.