

## ***Our Shield and Reward***

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**Genesis 15:1-18**  
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Dear friends in Christ,

Living for the Lord is not easy. So it's interesting to watch Abraham, the man called "the father of all believers." He walks with God, but he often stumbles and falls flat on his face. He has trouble believing that God will do what He says. And I get that! I can relate. And I'm pretty sure we all can. It isn't easy to walk by faith all the time. Especially when God seems absent or very slow in doing what we expect. Or when He does the opposite of what we might expect. To keep moving forward in your walk with the LORD is hard, especially in those times when we can't seem to figure out what He is up to in our life. We've got the Bible. And it's God's word. But it doesn't answer all of our questions to our satisfaction or curiosity at times.

Girls and boys, Abram didn't have a Bible like we do which he could read to learn more about God. But from time to time God spoke to Abram. In Genesis 15, the chapter starts,

*Gen 15:1 After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:*

A vision is kind of like a dream but you're not sleeping. And in this vision Abram and God talk and walk together.

### **Two Frustrations**

In this vision, Abram seems frustrated with God. Two unfulfilled promises of God trouble him.

First of all, Abram is still counting on God's promise in Genesis 12:2.

*Gen 12:2 "I will make you into a great nation  
and I will bless you;*

And the second reason for Abram's frustration with God is that God seems too slow in giving him possession of the Promised Land. He's living there but he doesn't own any part of it. He says in v.8

*Gen 15:8 "how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"*

The answer lies in the opening verse of the chapter, which is, you could say, the theme of the vision. The LORD says,

*Gen 15:1 ... "Do not be afraid, Abram.*

*I am your shield, your very great reward."*

I prefer the NIV footnote translation which says, "*I am your shield; your reward will be very great.*"

That helps us understand why Abram might wonder how and when God will make his reward very great. Abram appears to be getting impatient and asks God some hard questions. Look at verse 2:

*Gen 15:2 ...Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of*

*Damascus?”<sup>3</sup> And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”*

It’s like he’s asking God, “How can I continue to trust you when I still don’t have a son of my own as you promised me?”

I like it that we can ask the LORD questions. And you should notice that even Abram’s question is not without faith. That may sound a bit strange but it’s true of all of us in times of great testing. Questions or doubts are not the opposite of faith. Notice that although Abram is troubled, his faith in God’s trustworthiness comes out even in his questions. Two times he questions God—in both v.2 and v.8. But both times he addresses God saying, “O Sovereign LORD.”

That is a type of confession of faith. You see, in order to begin to be patient when we have questions or troubles in our life, we need to know who the LORD is that we put our hope and trust in. When things go bad, we look forward to a day when things may be better again. We hope for a better day, a better life. But you need something solid to base that hope for the future on. And the LORD is that solid basis for our hope.

### **Hope from the Sovereign LORD**

When we say the LORD is sovereign it means He is all-seeing, all-knowing, and all-powerful. The world is His and He controls it. He is intimately involved in it. The God of Abram is not a God who created the world and then left it alone. Deists believe the world is like a watch that God has wound up and now He is just waiting for it to unwind in exactly the way He has predetermined. Christianity is not fatalistic like that. We do not believe that God simply stands at a distance from the world with no daily involvement in what goes on here. Or with no interest in helping us or connecting with us. No, the God of Abram, your God, my God is the LORD who promises His love and faithfulness to little babies this morning. He is the God who cares deeply about what happens in the world. Yes, He cares about our hurts and our joys. He loves us and He is sovereign over us.

This is what we might call “sovereignty with personality.” That’s why Abram calls Him Sovereign *LORD*. LORD—as I said earlier—is the covenant name of God, describing Him as faithful, reliable, dependable. Not distant, but caring. Not removed, but involved—so involved, in fact, that He came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ, wrapping Himself up with us, becoming one of us. It’s good to remember when weariness sets in that the One who calls us to trust and serve Him went all the way to the struggle of the cross to serve us. He gave up His life in exchange for ours. Yet He remains sovereign over all things. This was part of His sovereign plan to redeem us from our sin and reconcile us to Himself. So deep is the love of the LORD for His people. He came to take up our sin, to carry our sorrows, to know our life.

The questions Abram asks of his sovereign LORD are normal for someone in his position. “LORD, I’ve been following you—and trying to trust you completely—for years now. But I’m still waiting. How can I become the father of all believers when I haven’t got a son? And how can I be sure I will get the land you promised?” Abram has grown tired of waiting, even to the point of questioning God.

What are you waiting upon the Lord for? Have you prayed for a spouse? Or for children but haven't received them? Maybe you're waiting for wayward children to come back to the Lord. Maybe you're waiting for a good report from the doctor that doesn't seem to come. Maybe you're waiting to get in with a certain group of people, or a certain company. Maybe waiting to make a move. There are lots of things we might have to wait for. Does God's timing seem off to you? Are there some things you think God can and should do differently? Questions you have about His plan for your life?

I sometimes think that too. In the past five months with my daughter Rachel's brush with death and battle back to life, I've had some questions. Every time someone dies after we've prayed and prayed for him or her, it's not unusual to wonder what God is up to. Back in my first congregation as a pastor, a wife and mother of two teenage girls went in for surgery to remove a tumour in her brain. She never recovered. Instead, she was in a coma for over 15 years before she finally died. That's an awful long time to wait for the Lord to act on her behalf. That makes the five months of this journey our family has been on seem very small. And our story has a much happier ending. I probably won't understand until I get to heaven what God was up to in with that woman in a coma for 15 years. But it's totally normal and acceptable to wonder what He is up to in our lives. In our trials and waiting, we might say, "Can I keep on trusting the LORD through this?" I have questions about the sovereign plan of God. You might have situations in your own life which you are thinking about right now, things that make you wonder if our sovereign Lord really is doing something good.

He is! He is sovereign! But as I said, it's sovereignty with personality. God is our Sovereign *LORD*. Abram knew that. He was like us so often in the struggles of life. We want to know how long. And what the outcome will be. It's not that we don't trust God. We do. But we can't help asking what's on our minds. And those hard questions we ask are not offensive to the LORD. Yes, He is sovereign. Yes, He is carrying out His plan for all of us. But He's also our loving LORD who is patient and loving with us as He brings His great plan toward the target He has set.

As we stumble along in our faith at times, we should know that faith in God is more than just a feeling. Sometimes we don't *feel* close to God or *feel* that He is close to us. Faith is deeper than that. The Heidelberg Catechism wisely defines faith as "*a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in his Word is true; [but] also a deep-rooted assurance,*" that because of Christ we are secure with God (A. 21). It reminds us that all of God's "*creatures are ... completely in His hands...*" (A. 28) Thus Abram had to trust the plan of his sovereign *LORD*. He had to trust God to live up to His name. And so do we. That's what faith is all about.

Verse 6 says,

*Gen 15:6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*

Abram didn't earn his own righteousness. No, Abram believed the promises of God. Our righteousness too comes only by placing our trust for our whole life in the hands of God who promises to save us in Christ. Jesus Christ is our righteousness and helps us to live righteous lives that honour God more and more.

By faith in Christ, we receive the guarantee that the Sovereign Lord of the world cares for us in the day to day struggles we endure. We are promised that He is carrying out His perfect, sovereign plan in and through us. It may be beyond our grasp at times. It may require us to wait. And that's why God gives us visible reminders of His promises as well.

## **A Loving Reminder and Guarantee**

God gave Abram the covenant sign of circumcision. And He gives us the sign of baptism. Through it, He wants us to remember when we receive it and when we see it administered that He is sovereign and loving and faithful. God reminds Abram that He has been close to him for a long time already. God has guided Abram from Ur, through many difficulties, and brought him safely to Canaan—as promised. The obvious conclusion is that the Sovereign LORD will continue to work all things together for the good of Abram. In the same way, God's great plan for your life and mine will reach its goal.

But we must see that it's a question of timing. Abram is getting old—pushing 90—and he still doesn't have a son or any land. He lives in Canaan as a pilgrim. He has a place to feed his livestock and live, but it is not his. In fact, even when Sarah dies several years later, Abram has to buy a burial plot from the Hittites.

God's promises of children and land were on Abram's mind a lot. Evidently, the only thing Abram could figure out was that his servant could carry on the plan of God for him. Eliezer is Abram's most trusted servant and he is appointed as the heir to Abram's possessions. As Abram sees it, time is running out. He is waiting for God to act, but God doesn't. Instead, the Lord tells him,

*Gen 15:4 "This man (Eliezer) will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." <sup>5</sup> He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."*

Not all God's promises are fulfilled quickly by our standards. But to our sovereign God things look much different than they do to us. He sees the whole picture. We just see a small part in which we are involved. He explains to Abram that His plan for the land has over 400 years to be fulfilled and we cannot rush Him.

The one other thing we need to see in this passage—and it's important but we don't have a lot time for it today—is that the Lord seals His promises to Abram as another loving reminder of His promise and guarantee to fulfill it.

*Gen 15:8 But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" (referring to the Promised Land)*

*<sup>9</sup> So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon."*

As the story continues, we learn that the Lord makes that promise Himself. A lot of covenants were made between God and people, where each party made promises but in this covenant, the Lord alone seals the deal.

*Gen 15:17 When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.*

In a normal covenant between two people, each party walked between the animal halves. Normally, Abram would have had to walk between those pieces as well. But not this time. God seals the promises all by Himself. It's like a contract in which we would expect two sides to sign the deal in our day. But here God doesn't require Abram to sign the deal. He says in effect that He's signing it and that's all that's needed because He's faithful and will do what He said. Besides, the fulfillment requires much more than just one man can fulfill.

Unless, of course, that one man is the God-man, our Lord Jesus Christ. The sacrifice and covenant we witness here in Genesis 15 points us to Christ. He alone paid the price for our sin and ensured that we are dearly loved children of God. God's promises to be our God and Father are good because of Jesus. And through we face trials, struggles and sometimes have to wait a long time—maybe till after we are dead—to see God fulfill His promises, He will do what He said because of Jesus, the perfect sacrifice for us and our sin. He's the one and only reason God keeps His covenant with us. He's the guarantee that God will keep on doing all that He promises.

So, friends, God is our shield and will reward our faith in His time. Abram is concerned about receiving a son and the Promised Land, but God says, "Leave that concern to me. You have my promise that your descendants will possess this land. There will be many difficult days before that day comes. But don't be afraid, I am your shield. Trust me. Everything is right on target." And that's the same thing He wants us to know today, regardless of our situation. He will care for His children. He has a special place in His heart for these beautiful covenant children to whom He made promises in baptism this morning. He seals the deal in Christ. Christ is our shield and in Him our reward is great!

So don't be afraid in this life. And don't be discouraged when you stumble in your walk with God. He's stretching your faith and is patient with us. Moreover, we have God's covenant promise sealed with our grandfather Abraham and guaranteed in Christ. So we can rest in knowing that the Sovereign plan and work of our LORD in us and for us is good. And it's right on target.