



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Vibrant Faith: Genesis 12-25 wk. 2

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The word believe is a Hebrew word that means to place your weight on. One of the ways we would think of that would be whether or not a lake or a pond is frozen enough that you're willing to go out there and put your weight on it. If you believe like this Hebrew word, you're willing not just to say I believe, but you're willing to step out on the pond. You may ask me; do you think the pond's thick enough? And I might say, yes, I do. Mark, would you step out there? Well, that means I don't know that I really believe it. This Hebrew word doesn't mean some sort of intellectual ascent. It means that I'm willing to step out and put my faith, to trust. Abram was willing to entrust all that he was and all that he had into God's hands and he said, God, okay. I believe your promise. I believe you tell the truth. I trust you, and God said Abram, on the basis of that, I declare you righteous before me.

There's a number of New Testament passages that give considerable commentary on Genesis 15:6 but before I mention those, is there something in this text, in the Genesis 15 text, that helps us understand what exactly is it that Abram is believing? What is the basis of this promise? Well, I think there is, so let's read on. Verse seven, *"And he said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess it, and he said, oh Lord God, how may I know that I shall possess it?"* Again, Abram is asking the question to gain understanding. God, I understand what you've said and what you've promised, we'll possess this land. But here are the circumstances. There's a whole bunch of people living in the land and they don't seem like they want to leave, and you've promised that I'm going to possess the land. There seems to be quite a considerable gap between those two. How is this going to happen? In a sense what Abram is saying is God, could we maybe write up a contract that would explain this, in ancient language, a covenant. And God responds to that.

Verse nine, *"So he said to him, bring me a three-year-old heifer and a three-year-old female goat and a three-year-old ram and a turtle dove and a young pigeon. Then he brought all of these to him and cut them in two and laid each half opposite the other. But he did not cut the birds and the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses and Abram drove them away. Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. And God said to Abram, know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve. And afterward they will come out with many possessions. And as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace. You shall be buried at a good old age. Then in the fourth generation, they shall return here for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."*

God causes Abram to fall into this sleep and then he communicates to him. And what He communicates is how the events of the future are going to unfold and how His promise will be fulfilled. Starting in verse 13 He reminds them that they will be a people that will be strangers in a foreign land, and they will be

there, oppressed for 400 years. That's the time in Egypt where they would be under the pharaohs and then God will judge Pharaoh and the Egyptians, and they will leave with their possessions and they will head to the land of promise. Abram is promised he will die at a good old age. And also, there's a comment about the Amorites, which is a way of saying, when their evil has reached its full potential, then God will use the nation of Israel to come into the land and to judge them and you will possess the land. So, He lays out these events.

Now imagine how the first readers would have heard these words. Written by Moses, they would have been experiencing the fulfillment of this promise. They would have said, yes, we know that our descendants were in bondage in Egypt for 400 years, and the Pharaoh and his people received these plagues, the judgment of God, and we're in route to possessing the land of promise. And they would have been able to put these pieces together and say, we're right in the middle of God fulfilling this promise to Abram. It would've been a very exciting thing for them. But in the process of all that, there's some very interesting discussion about God establishing this covenant. As a matter of fact, the actual Hebrew language is that God cut a covenant with Abram. Sometimes we talk today about cutting a deal. That's where the language comes from. It comes from this ancient ritual of cutting a covenant.

God said to Abram, I want you to take a heifer. I want you to take a goat. I want you to take a lamb. I want a ram. I want you to take a pigeon and a turtle dove. And as soon as He said that Abram knew exactly what to do. As a matter of fact, the text indicates God didn't have to tell Abram what to do, he knew. In the ancient near-east, this was how they cut a covenant. This was, this was the deal. So, what they would do is they would find an area that had two banks that sloped and then came down to the middle. They would take these animals and they would cut them from nose to tail and split them right in half and they would lay the two halves on these two banks so that the blood would run down and puddle in the bottom. These covenants were always cut between a greater power and a lesser power and it was always the responsibility of the greater power to go first. And he would remove his sandals and he would walk between the halves of these animals. And in so doing he would wade through ankle deep blood and it would splash up on his legs. It was very graphic, and he would picture what meant that if I fail to keep this covenant in any way, this is what you may do to me. This is what you may do to me. So, he would walk through the blood and then the lesser king would take off his sandals and he would walk through the blood. And again, it was the symbolism. If I fail in any way to keep this covenant, this is what you may do to me. You may shed my blood for failure to keep the covenant.

As soon as God told Abram what he wanted, Abram knew what was coming. If you follow the chronology, there was a 24-hour lapse there where Abram probably took most of the day to find these animals and define the spot and to cut them and lay this all out. What he had time to do all day is to think. As a matter of fact, the text says that Abram was terrified. This great darkness came over him. What was he terrified of? He was terrified of what he knew God was now going to demand of him. He knew what was coming, that he and God would walk through the blood and he knew there was no way that he could keep the covenant. There was no way that he could live up to God's standard. Therefore, the covenant would be broken, his blood would be shed, the promises would be null and void. So, he was absolutely terrified.

He was terrified of what he knew God was now going to demand of him. We pick it up then in verse 17, *"And it came about when the sun had set that it was very dark and behold there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram saying to your descendants, I have given this land from the river of Egypt as far as the great*

river, the river Euphrates, the Kenites, and the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites and the Rephaim and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Girgashites and the Jebusites."

This is an amazing picture as Abram sleeps, but still sees this carried out, you have this smoking oven that could be translated "with a flaming torch" that represented the presence of God, represented the all-consuming holiness of God. And that oven passed through the blood, through the halves, establishing this covenant. But what was unusual is Abram did not follow. Abram did not pass through the blood. This would not be a bilateral covenant. This would not have two parties that pass through the blood. This would be a unilateral covenant. God Himself and only God would pass through the blood which was His way of saying Abram, if either you or I break this covenant in any way, it will be my blood that will be shed for your forgiveness. And it was upon that covenant that the promise would be kept to Abram.

For thousands of years, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, the Hebrew people at three o'clock in the afternoon in the temple area would take a lamb and at exactly three o'clock, they would slit his throat and the blood would run down the stones that made up this sacrificial altar because they believed that the blood reminded God of His promise. When they saw that blood, they believed it reminded God of his promise to Abram that if either of us fail, it will be Me that will shed My blood to make the covenant right.

And for a couple thousand years, that was practiced until God became flesh and was nailed to that cross. And just as in the Abrahamic Covenant, for three hours that afternoon it was dark, and terror filled the land. At the end of that darkness at exactly three o'clock that afternoon when the priest down in the temple put the knife to the throat of the lamb, at that very moment when the lamb was slain, Jesus gave up His spirit and He died thus fulfilling the covenant that God had made 2000 years before. God had promised that if you don't keep the covenant, it will be My blood that will be shed to make it right.

In both Romans chapter 4 and Galatians chapter 3, Paul offers significant commentary on Genesis 15:6. In both cases, he was writing to an audience, whether in Rome or in Galatia, that believed somehow, they had to perform to be right with God. There were all these religious hoops they had to jump through in order to be declared righteous before God. And in order to convince them that simply was not the case. Paul reaches back all the way into the Old Testament and he pulls out the story of Abram and this covenant and he says, that's not the way it is at all. Abram believed and he was credited with righteousness.

There are some of you who really, really struggle with this. You struggle with understanding that it's on the basis of God's shed blood, that you're acceptable to Him. You just keep trying to perform. You just keep trying to do something. You just keep trying to jump through the religious hoops in all sincerity to somehow be acceptable to God. You need to take a very close look at the imagery of this covenant in Genesis 15. It was not you and God passing through the blood. It was only God and that was His way of saying that if you break the covenant, I will pay the price. It will be My blood that will be shed so that you can receive the promise. And that's exactly what He did. It says in both Romans 4 and Galatians 3 that if you choose to believe, if you choose to trust that that's what God did in order to keep the covenant and offer this promise to you, then you become a child of Abraham. You become a recipient of the Covenant Promise.

There are some of you who really struggle with this whole concept of eternal security. Today you feel safe, tomorrow you might not, and you just go up and down like a roller coaster. That might be valid if it

was you and God passing through the covenant, but it wasn't. It was God alone. Therefore, your salvation is not based on your performance as good or as poor as it may be. That's never been what makes you righteous before God. It is based solely on God's willingness to shed his blood in order to keep the covenant.

If you have never trusted Jesus' death on the cross, his shed blood for your sin, maybe you've been jumping through the religious hoops and trying to do the religious performance and maybe you're ready to say it all finally makes sense. Maybe this'll be your hour of decision by faith just to believe that God tells the truth. You don't have to perform. You don't have to do. You just believe. If you do, God will credit it to your account as righteousness. You will stand right before God.

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Arnie: So, Bryan, this idea of cutting a covenant by killing various animals and walking through the blood seems kind of strange to me. What does that picture for us?

Bryan: Well, it is kind of strange to us, but wasn't strange to them. I think the first readers would have clearly understood that kings walked through the blood, the blood splashes up on them, and the symbolism is this is what you may do to me if I fail to keep our agreement, the covenant. So what's unique in this is God alone goes through the blood, so to speak. And so God is saying, Abraham, if you or I fail to keep the covenant, it'll be my blood that will be shed to make it right. So think about this: Go back to Genesis 3 and the promise in 3:15 was the seed of a woman. That's a human. We know there's some shedding of the blood in Genesis 3 in order to get the skins to cover their shame. So by Genesis 15 we know that the seed of the woman, human somehow will be God in the flesh because it's His blood that will be shed for sin. So by Genesis 15, that much of our theology is already starting to develop. It's a beautiful picture of what's to come in the Savior.

Cara: Were the believers in the Old Testament saved in a different way compared to how we're saved today?

Bryan: Yeah, that's a great question. And the answer, the simple answer would be no, they were saved by faith. That's where the Genesis 15:6 verse is so important. Abraham believed and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, but they were looking forward to the fulfillment of the promise. So, I don't think Abraham understood all the details of what was to come, but he understood God made a promise and the basics of that promise. You have that in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 that Abraham was saved by faith, not by works of the law. So sometimes I refer to it as like credit, they're saved on credit. But what Hebrews 9 tells us is that if Jesus hadn't died on the cross, none of them would have been saved. It was all on the basis of what was to come and Jesus' death on the cross is what was the fulfillment of the promise. And Hebrews actually says it's really at that point their salvation is complete.

Arnie: So ultimately, what is faith?

Bryan: So, faith is belief, but it's not just an intellectual ascent. It's a belief that moves to action. The Hebrew word means to stand on. So, you think about here in Nebraska in the winter, if you believe that the pond is frozen, then you step out on it. That's kind of the picture there. But basically, it says it's the assurance of things hoped for. So, hope is something that's in the future, but guaranteed. So it's the assurance, it's the substance, the conviction or the evidence of things not seen. So that Hebrews definition is, I believe what God promised is true to such a degree that I actually live that way today. So it's belief, but it's belief that manifests itself in action. It defines the trajectory of my story.

Cara: So, where does works fit into our faith then?

Bryan: Well, going back to James, that a saving faith is a faith that works. So, it's the fruit, it's the result. It's the outflow, some sort of action I take because I do believe. So, another way of saying that is we could spy on you for a week, maybe two weeks, and watching how you live, we could figure out what you actually believe, not what you say you believe. What you actually believe. And one of the things I contend is we have a lot of people in our churches who don't believe what they say they believe. If they did, they would live differently.