

BASIC BIBLE THEMES

SESSION 1: COVENANT

by Stephen Lennox

Scripture Background: Genesis 15

Robert William Service's poem, "The Cremation of Sam McGee," tells the story of a promise. Sam McGee, who never felt warm after going to the Arctic from Tennessee, makes his companion promise to cremate his remains after he dies. Sure enough, after a long dog-sled ride through the bitterly cold terrain, McGee passes on. The companion, having given his word, must haul around the corpse until he can keep his promise. As much as he would have liked to dump the body and move on without the added weight, he feels bound to honor his word. After all, he observes, "a promise made is a debt unpaid." Finally, having found fuel enough to carry out his promise, he "burrowed a hole in the glowing coal" and "stuffed in Sam McGee." When he finally worked up the courage to look in and see what remained of the body, he found –

Sam, looking cool and calm,
In the heart of the furnace roar;
And he wore a smile you could see a mile,
And he said: "Please close that door.
It's fine in here, but I greatly fear
You'll let in the cold and storm –
Since I left Plumtree down in Tennessee,
It's the first time I've been warm."

From this humorous ballad comes the important truth that "a promise made is a debt unpaid," a debt to be satisfied at any cost. In the Bible, we find that God takes His promises seriously, satisfying each one. Whether it was His promise to rescue His people from Egypt, to satisfy their physical needs, to protect them from danger, or to bring the Messiah, God always kept His word.

While there is much to be said about God the "promise keeper," we ought to recognize the profound implications of the fact that God makes

promises at all. Throughout Scripture, we find recurring themes that wrap themselves in and around the stories about God's people: faithfulness, loving kindness, obedience, love, grace, fellowship, worship. Once we have grasped these key concepts, we have come a long way in understanding the heart of the Bible. And all of these important ideas are contained in one word: covenant.

Many feel the Bible is a mind-boggling array of unrelated promises, prohibitions, and personalities. They can fail to see that there is a consistent thread running throughout the story of God's dealings with His people. This thread is the covenant which God initiates between himself and Abraham in Genesis 15.

Another word for covenant is "testament" and, in fact, the rest of the Old and New "Testaments" build on what takes place in Genesis 15. The covenant we read about in this passage is the same covenant that was renewed with Moses and the Israelites at Sinai. And it is a part of the same covenant He made centuries later by offering His only Son as a final sign and seal that God, more than anything else, wants to live in close relationship with His people.

Genesis 15 is one of the great passages of the Bible because it so clearly shows the loving, promise-making and promise-keeping character of God. The covenant made here was not a contract between equals. Based on His undeserving love for all of humanity, God chose to make a promise—that He himself guaranteed – with someone He had created. God made the covenant with faithful Abraham, and its benefits carry all the way down to our present day, for all who chose to enter into a relationship of love and obedience with the God of the universe.

Genesis 15 describes several important divine promises. After exploring this passage in some detail, we will see what we can learn about a God who makes promises.

The World of Genesis 15

From the opening chapters of Genesis, it is clear that creation had a problem. The world which God created as good had become terribly bad. Sin, having taken root in the first parents, spread like a cancer, corrupting the whole world and all its inhabitants. Even after Noah, the world continued its downward spiral of sin. Most distressing to the divine heart was how sin had broken the relationship between God and His people.

God set about to reconcile the world to himself in a most unusual fashion. He called one man, Abram (later named Abraham), to leave his own people and become the forefather of the nation of Israel. Through this nation, God promised to bless all nations of the earth (Genesis 12). God revealed how He intended to bless the earth and reconcile it to himself in the centuries to follow. Through the Jewish nation, He produced the Messiah. Paul described God's plan this way, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

For whatever reasons, God did not execute His plan quickly. Instead, Abraham's call was followed by long periods of divine silence. Abraham, meanwhile, experienced one embarrassing and difficult experience after another. First, he was evicted from Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20), then territorial disputes forced a separation from his own nephew (Genesis 13:1-18). After this, Abraham became embroiled in the middle of a conflict between warring cities (Genesis 14:1-24).

Genesis 15 marks an important moment in these early days of God's plan. In this chapter, God unfolds more fully how He intends to reconcile the world to himself. He reveals something of that plan to Abraham in the form of two promises (covenants): (1) Abraham would father a son, and (2) his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan. How those promises fit into God's plan and the surprising way that God committed himself to them deserves a closer look.

The chapter opens with God appearing to Abraham in a vision and identifying himself as

Abraham's "shield" and "very great reward" (v. 1). Although "shield" usually implies protection, here it means more. The Hebrew word can be translated "king"; this is probably what fits best here. By revealing himself as Abraham's king, God challenged Abraham to full obedience. He must follow God as a loyal subject, obeying each step in the divine plan. How well Abraham followed God was evident on Mount Moriah when he was willing to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. God's introduction as Abraham's king also brought a message of reassurance with its reminder that Abraham is not traveling this strange road alone. He is in the service of His sovereign.

To understand what God meant by His reference to "great reward," we must return to Genesis 14. There, in verses 22-24, Abraham refused to accept a reward from the King of Sodom. The reward was rightfully his because of his military help. Abraham, however, refused to accept any payment from this king, choosing instead to wait for his reward from God. He preferred the invisible riches of God's kingdom to the visible wealth of the King of Sodom. Genesis 15:1 reveals what a wise choice this was, for God promised him a "very great reward." Still more encouraging for Abraham, this reward was to be found not in what God gives, but in God himself: "I am...your very great reward." It is always a wise bargain to choose an invisible God over anything visible.

A Question and a Promise

God's identification of himself as Abraham's reward raised a question in Abraham's mind, a question which prompts his comments in verses 2-3. While he knew that in having God he had all things, Abraham was troubled by the fact that he had no son. When he died, his considerable wealth would go to his chief servant, Eliezer, according to the custom of that day. In a complaint that reveals both Abraham's confidence and submission to God ("Sovereign Lord"), he reminds God that he has no son of his own.

God responds to this complaint in the form of a solemn promise. Abraham would not leave his wealth to his servant. Instead, he would become a father and his own son would be his heir. God sweetens this promise still more by promising that

this son would be the first of many descendants. Just how many dawned on Abraham as he stood beneath the clear night sky of Canaan and gazed up into the uncountable stars. In that day, the promise of a son and countless descendants was the best news a childless old man could hear.

As incredible as this promise was, Abraham believed that God would do just what He promised. Centuries later, Paul applauded Abraham's faith. He described it as "being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (Romans 4:21). Such a leap of faith was nothing new for Abraham. He had believed enough to leave his home and follow God, not knowing where he was going (Hebrews 11:8). Later, when God asked him to surrender his most precious possession – this same promised son – he obeyed without waiting for answers to his questions. Faith so characterized his life that he became known as the "father of all who believe" (Romans 4:11). When God saw that Abraham took Him at His word, He "credited [it] to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:9). God recognized Abraham's great faith and was very pleased with it.

Perhaps to express His pleasure, God revealed Himself still further to Abraham in verse 7. This time He described Himself as the Lord who had taken Abraham from his home in Ur to possess the land of Canaan. As in verse 2, Abraham responded to God's word with a question, "How can I know for sure?" (v. 8). How surprising that only two verses after being commended for his faith, Abraham questioned God! This question arose, however, not from Abraham's lack of faith, but because his faith needed strengthening.

Some people question God in order to avoid His demands upon their lives. Like the lawyer who resisted Jesus' call to love his neighbor (Luke 10:25-37), they throw out questions like smoke screens, hoping to hide their lack of obedience. This was not Abraham's motivation. He already had faith; he wanted that faith strengthened. His question sprang from the same motivation as the request of the man in Mark 9:24: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief." God does not mind our questions, if they are asked to strengthen faith.

Sealing the Deal

That God did not mind Abraham's question is evident from verses 9-21, where God provides the certainty Abraham sought. As in verse 5, this certainty came through an object lesson. Earlier it was a starry night sky; here the certainty came through a bloody ceremony. God instructed Abraham to take several animals and birds, cut the animals in half, and lay them opposite each other in the open field. (He did not cut up the birds, perhaps because they were too small.) Today, we finalize contracts in a lawyer's office at a table piled high with legal documents that the average person could not begin to understand. Abraham would be as baffled by our modern "ceremonies" as we are by the legal ceremony described in these verses. In order to seal a promise, one of the parties would walk between the dismembered pieces. In effect, he would be saying, "Let what happened to these animals happen to me, if I break my word."

After carrying out his instructions to cut up the animals, Abraham waited for God to act. We don't know how long he waited, but it must have been long enough for buzzards to get wind of the carcasses and descend for dinner. Apparently unaware of the cause for the divine delay, Abraham chased them off and continued to wait. Finally, around sunset, he fell into a deep, unnatural, and unsettling sleep. He felt himself immersed in terrifying darkness. Then out of that darkness, he heard God solemnly promise to give the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants. There would be some delay (400 years) and some difficulty (the darkness of slavery and mistreatment), but the light of God's favor would shine again, bringing the Israelites into the Promised Land. Abraham, meanwhile, would die in peace at an old age.

In one of the most striking pictures in the Bible, a blazing torch and a pot filled with fire and smoke passed between the animal carcasses, unassisted by any visible means. These objects were chosen, I suspect, to reveal something of the divine character. As a torch lights up the darkness, God reveals His nature to humanity. As a flame consumes what is temporary, the unworthy elements of our existence—the "wood, hay, and straw" (1 Corinthians 3:12)—are consumed by His greatness.

The smoking firepot reminds us that a full understanding of God is hidden behind the smoke of His mystery. As these objects passed between the animal pieces, God willingly committed himself to keep His promises to Abraham. God himself passed between the pieces in a solemn promise to Abraham.

Biblical history reveals that God did, in fact, keep His word. He gave Abraham a son, Isaac, who became the father of Jacob. Jacob (also known as Israel) had 12 sons from whom the 12 tribes of Israel trace their descent. Just as God promised, Abraham's descendants grew until they outnumbered the stars in the sky. After four centuries of slavery in Egypt, Moses liberated the Israelites, leaving behind a plundered and defeated Egypt. They entered the Promised Land under Joshua and defeated the Canaanites with God's assistance. Abraham, as predicted, died in peace and prosperity at the ripe, old age of 175 (Genesis 25:7-8). How wonderfully reassuring to remember that God is the original promise-keeper!

God the Promise-Maker

The emphasis of Genesis 15 is not on how God keeps His promises, however, but on the fact that He is even willing to make promises. Throughout the Bible, we find that God is always making promises to His people. He promises to answer their prayers, comfort the bereaved, guide the searching, pardon the guilty, protect the endangered, enlighten the simple, provide for the needy, and much more. Over and over, we meet a God who willingly "walks between the pieces" for His people. Clearly, not all of the Bible's promises are meant for us to claim. God's promise to provide a son was given to Abraham, not every childless couple. How then should Christians read the promises in the Bible? They should ask first what they can learn about a God who makes promises.

One thing to be noted is that God's promises imply a divine plan. If I promise my children that on a certain day we will drive to visit their grandparents, it is only after I have made a plan. I have consulted our work and school schedules, found a time when there are no other pressing commitments, and made certain the car can handle the trip.

To make such a promise without having a plan would be irresponsible (not to mention terribly disappointing to my children). It would be like the man Jesus spoke about who built a tower without counting the cost. These promises to Abraham clearly imply that God already had a plan, a plan which included Isaac and the land of Canaan.

We also see that this was no ordinary plan. God's promise in verse 4 strongly emphasizes that not Eliezer, but the one born to Abraham, will inherit everything. The Hebrew words of verse 13 are quite emphatic: "know for certain." We also see the importance of God's plan in the ceremony of verses 9-21. It is so important that God himself "walks between the pieces" to guarantee that it will come about. Abraham may not have understood the full importance of this plan or when God would fulfill it, but history has made it plain to us. God's plan was nothing less than His way of reconciling the world to himself and solving the problem that sin had created. All who have found salvation in Christ are part of that great plan and can rejoice that they follow a promise-making God.

Second, since God makes promises, He must place a high premium on faith. A promise, by definition, implies that the fulfillment remains in the future. It is too late to promise a trip to Grandma's house when we are pulling into her driveway. By that time, no promise is necessary. The waiting that comes between promise and fulfillment is not easy however. Only faith in the promise-maker enables one to endure the delay. God's promises are an important way that He builds faith into His people. How often in times of struggle and testing have I wished God would immediately intervene and fulfill His promises. If the answer were to come immediately, however, I could not develop the faith which He values so highly.

Why does God consider faith so important? According to the writer of Hebrews, only those with faith are able to "please God" (11:6). But why is this so? What is there about God that makes faith the only way to delight His heart? Hebrews 11:6 goes on to say that faith is necessary "because anyone who comes to [God] must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." Only by faith can we access a God who belongs to a realm not reached by human reason.

Only by faith can we understand that God wants to be found, is fair enough to reward our best efforts, and knows who “earnestly” seeks Him. Only by faith can we understand what God wants from us; only by faith can we meet His expectations. In other words, faith is essential to know God’s existence, His nature, and His will. If faith makes this possible, no wonder God makes such a special point of building it into our lives through His promises.

Finally, in His habit of promise-making, God reveals His love for us. When is the last time you promised something to a total stranger? You only make promises to those with whom you already have some relationship. God’s promises prove the reality of the relationships He has willingly initiated with His people. God did not have to make any promises to Abraham. His sole motivation was love for Abraham and for people in general. All of God’s promises have arisen from a heart of love and compassion.

Why, after all, does God make promises? He does not make promises to serve His needs as if His ego needed the boost that would come from seeing our delighted reaction. Nor does God need to make promises in order for His plans to succeed. He could easily have given a son to Abraham and Sarah without telling them about it first. He makes promises for our benefit, not His. He makes promises because He cares enough to become a debtor to us. After all, “a promise made is a debt unpaid.” God made the promises in Genesis 15 because He cared about Abraham. He knew how difficult it was to wait for God. He knew how hard it was to understand delay and unanswered questions. It was love for Abraham that made God “pass between the pieces.”

Conclusion

When we promise our children something we know they have been longing for and something we know we can deliver, are we not looking primarily for the delight that our promise will bring? Why do we want to delight them if not because we love them? At times, Christians struggle with feelings of loneliness and discouragement. Problems loom before us like mountains, and the deep darkness of an uncertain future hides our path. God seems so distant as our prayers go

unanswered. At times like this, God’s promises remind us that He is willing to “pass between the pieces” for His people. He knows our struggles with delay and He lovingly provides, through His promises, a bench on which to rest while we wait. While we are right to celebrate a promise-keeping God, we can also rejoice in a God who makes promises. His promises show that He is a God with an important plan, a plan that means salvation for all. He is a God who longs to cultivate faith in His people, knowing that we need faith to follow Him. A God who makes promises shows that He loves people enough to “pass between the pieces” for them.