

Chapter 15 of Genesis is just as important as all those other chapters that we looked at. In fact I believe that it sets the parameters for all the rest of world history—what God establishes with Abraham, the Abrahamic Covenant. We won't get into the actual covenant in this lesson, but we will talk about it and give you some background.

By way of introduction, let me ask you a question: How many of you have a contract that you are under right now? At work and a mortgage, marriage, etc. In our culture contracts are very common and actually have been common throughout history. And a covenant is nothing more than a contract. I will give you an example of this. The one in Genesis 15 is most important because it is a covenant that God enters into.

The context: we looked into Primeval History and now Patriarchal History, and this is the last part of the history of Abraham, his faith and the land. We have seen the development of his faith. Faith is tested and requires exercise like a muscle, so if you expect to have your faith strengthened, you will have to go through challenges or tests or opportunities to be able to trust God in certain situations. The greater the challenge, the greater the opportunity for growth in the area of faith, so that is the theme that runs all the way through chapter 15 which is kind of a climax through this part of the history of Abraham.

His first test of faith was his call to leave the land of Ur in chapter 11; then there is a challenge outside of the land in chapters 12.10-13.4. Then we have another challenge in terms of relationships with Lot that went with the land. All of these are relating to the promised land in the rest of chapter 13. Last time we completed chapter 13—another test or challenge in terms of physical war; we used that in terms of our experience in the spiritual realm and that is how we will be tested, and oftentimes it

will be a spiritual test that will manifest itself physically, but underlying it will be a spiritual test in which we can trust God.

I. Primeval History	1.1-11.26
II. Patriarchal History	11.27-50.26
A. History of Abraham	11.27-25.18
1. His Faith and the Land	11.27-15.21
a. Call to the Land	11.27-12.9
b. Challenge out of Land	12.10-13.4
c. Challenge of Lot for the Land	13.5-8
d. Challenge of War in Land	14
e. Covenant for the Land	15

And now we have the covenant for the land, chapter 15, where after Abraham's faith is developed to a certain point, God gives him assurance and assures him that He will complete all that He has promised for him. It is something like a double—or quadruple, you might say, commitment that is a covenant; it is a legally binding document that God will enter into. So this chapter is very, very important for lots of reasons.

We will see, not that these are the beginnings, but an emphasis on grace, not law.

Importance

1. **Grace not law.** We will see that it is an unconditional covenant, not dependent on Abraham, solely dependent on God and only God. So we could say that God, underlying the Abrahamic Covenant, He is entering into a covenant of *grace*. God does not need, or there is nothing that demands that God enter into any contract or any covenant. So it is always on the basis of grace.

2. **Sacrifice is central.** We will see that part of it deals with sacrifice. So sacrifice is central; in fact it is ratified by sacrifice. In the latter part of the lesson we will see early verses related to it.

So sacrifice is involved as we have already seen—it was introduced back in Genesis 3.

3. **Basis of Exodus.** And if you have studied the book of Exodus, there are little phrases in there that refer back to the Abrahamic Covenant. So when God moves to intervene on behalf of the children of Israel in the book of Exodus, in the events surrounding *the* Exodus references are made to the Abrahamic Covenant. God *remembers* the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So it is the basis of what God is doing with the nation of Israel, beginning to establish them as a *nation*. So it is very, very important.

4. **Fulfillment by Messiah.** And even beyond that, in the rest of the OT, you will see that it is fulfilled by Messiah. You can also see that from the NT, particularly the letter to the Galatians that Paul writes. He connects the blessing of gentiles through the Messiah, through Jesus Christ, tying it to the Abrahamic Covenant. So there is a fulfillment, not a total fulfillment, but a major one that is fulfilled by the Messiah.

5. **Future blessings of Israel.** Fifthly, throughout Israel's history the blessings are going to be dependent on this contract that God enters into. And in some cases it is related back to the Abrahamic Covenant and sometimes it is just assumed and it is not mentioned, but underlying it is what God has promised the children of Israel, even before they are a nation.

6. **Justification by faith.** And, another reason, even theologically, why this chapter which involves the covenant is important: it gives us insight into justification by faith. We will spend a little time on verse 6 where it is presented. It is that verse that Paul quotes in the book of Romans to demonstrate that justification by faith is not a new concept and it is even goes all the way back probably even before Abraham, but Paul uses Abraham as someone *before law*; before the Mosaic Law came, there was justification by faith. And Abraham received that justification as noted by Genesis 15.6. So it is foundational to all of salvation, all of our relationship to God and we see it here.

7. **Parameters of world history.** And, as I said in the introduction, it also lays out the parameters for the rest of history. We have already talked about that in terms of the promise God made in chapter 12, where those that bless Israel shall be blessed and those that curse Israel shall be cursed and that has worked itself out historically in the dealings of the nation of Israel with all of the surrounding nations and all of the nations they have had contact with throughout their history, and it will also be true in terms of Israel's future when God brings them back into a relationship with Himself and restores that.

I think we are seeing the first stages of that in that Israel is back in the land today and nation of Israel exists today. In fact it is a caution to us in the United States: we have been blessed, I think, throughout our history, as supporters of Israel. There is a whole movement within our government that is not so favorable towards Israel and if we ever turn against them, we will be cursed as a nation as well. This, also will work itself out in the future. So this chapter is very important because it gives us the very initiation of the Abrahamic Covenant.

A. History of Abraham	11.27-25.18
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e. Covenant for the Land	15
1) Promises of Seed	15.1-6
a) Protection of Lord	15.1

The covenant begins with promises which are only *promises* at the beginning of the chapter, but these promises will be incorporated into the covenant; they will be essential stipulations and elements of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Chapter 15, verse 1, gives us a little of the context:

15.1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.”

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram, What things? The immediate context is the battle that was just won by Abraham, restoring Lot and restoring the spoils of war to the cities on the Jordan plain, and those that were involved.

And there are other hints here, for example, when God says, ‘I am a shield’, I think it is in a military context. So after these things, very definitely pertains to the immediate context, but I think, within the broader context of the book of Genesis, it also refers to the things relating to the development of Abraham’s faith and there are little hints in the chapter to God responding and in *some* way, giving Abraham assurance that not only is He going to fulfill all that He has said but that, in a way, He is blessing Abraham and the faithfulness that He has observed in Abraham—even though it is an *unconditional* covenant, there is a little of that element in it as well.

So he sees a vision, the Lord coming to him—if you are keeping track of words to Abraham where, in this context, God actually speaks to him. So in a vision it is audible and perhaps even visual.

15.1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.”

And the context, at least the words Do not fear. Now there is every reason to fear, at least in the immediate context—after a war. Sometimes an invading force will re-group and may come back, strengthened, so from a physical and material aspect, Abraham would have every reason to have legitimate fear of what

might transpire with a renewed invasion. But the text doesn’t tell us that that would happen or that it did happen. We do know that Abraham probably needed a little reenforcement and God gives him that assurance. Do not fear, Abram, and the reason: I am a shield to you. And it is probably a reminder that as Abraham went into battle and used a literal shield, God was with him and God was battling for him. In fact, God had already demonstrated Himself to be a protector of Abraham. And this imagery—not only for Abram but if you study through the rest of the OT, is a common figure and image of protection. God, our protector.

And even in the NT, the ‘full armor of God’ includes the shield of faith, so God is *our* protector as well. As we experience testing or attacks by the enemy, by trusting in Him, the shield of faith—believing that He will protect and accomplish His purposes in the midst of the attack or in the midst of a struggle—will show Him to be a shield, He will be our ultimate protector—and in an ultimate sense, our salvation is secure because He is our spiritual shield, and there will be nothing that will remove us from that eternal state that God has put us into. So this imagery of the shield will have practical implications for us as well. We need to claim it as a promise in the midst of attack and in fact we are encouraged to put it on as part of the armor.

15.1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.”

And the last part of this passage: Your reward shall be very great, probably an allusion to what God had already promised him in terms of being a blessing, the father of a great nation and having many descendants—God is going to bring it about. So here He is giving it in the form of a promise, but these promises will be incorporated later on in the chapter into the Abrahamic Covenant. So it involves the relationship between Abram and

God Himself, and God as protector and provider and the one who blesses Abraham with reward.

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 - b. Challenge out of Land 12.10-13.4
 - c. Challenge of Lot for the Land 13.5-8
 - d. Challenge of War in Land 14
 - e. Covenant for the Land 15
 - 1) Promises of Seed 15.1-6
 - a) Protection of Lord 15.1
 - b) Perplexity of Abraham 15.2-3

That is the *protection* of Abraham with the Lord, and Abraham, in the context, is thinking of those promises; so in verses 2 and 3 we see the *perplexity* of Abram because he doesn't have any children.

15.2 Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"

So, in verse 2, he is asking, 'How could this happen?' We have already seen, and we will see later on, that Sarai is an older woman and has never had children. She is incapable of having children, so Abram is thinking about all these things, responding, speaking with the Lord: O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless? How can these things be fulfilled? It's impossible.

Interestingly, we have a little title here; the English is not so clear. 'Lord' is usually a reference to Yahweh, but here it is another name or title, *adonai*, relating to the deity of God, and you might expect 'God' to be *elohim*, but it is not. This one is Yahweh, so it is actually 'O adonai yahweh,' what will You give me, since I am childless? It is kind of a double reference to the

deity or God Himself, recognizing that Abram is dealing with the Creator of all things and the One that enters into relationship with man. We have already seen *Yahweh* but it is the first occurrence of *Adonai*.

15.2 Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"

Then he gives further elaboration. In fact this is very common: archeology has demonstrated that in that timeframe it was common to have several servants in an extended household and obviously Abraham with no children would have had several servants that would perform many tasks. He would have had people to care for the many flocks and all of the issues of the family.

Archeology has demonstrated that it was very common that if you had no children and you had an estate you would leave it to a trusted heir. And since Abram has promises that involve a legacy or heirship, he says, following the culture, that he had Eliezer of Damascus. Apparently he was the most trusted and highest ranking servant that Abram had; he was thinking of what was normal and traditional, and common in that patriarchal timeframe.

15.3 And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir."

Then he elaborates, Since You have given no offspring to me ...

15.3 And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir."

...one born in my house is my heir. God has not performed a miracle, so he takes it to the Lord and asks the question.

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 - 1) Promises of Seed 15.1-6
 - a) Protection of Lord 15.1
 - b) Perplexity of Abraham 15.2-3
 - c) Promise of Yahweh 15.4-6

Now we have the promise that Yahweh makes in the next passage, verses 4-6.

15.4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.”

Now he not only has a vision but the word of the LORD, Yahweh, came to him, saying,...

15.4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.”

...This man will not be your heir. So God is informing him that He is going to do something very different, no normal or typical of what happens in that culture and would have been expected.

15.4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.”

but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir. So Abram, even though physically impossible to bring about a child, not only because of older age on his part but also because also because of the situation with Sarai, God is saying He is going to work something supernatural. So this is the first promise that God is going to deal in a very supernatural way to bring about what He has promised in terms of descendants. We can see in chapter 16 that he doesn't quite get it yet...

15.5 And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

And He took him outside to give him a visual example or illustration of what He was going to do. Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars. There would have been an abundance—no lights to obscure the sky—so there would have been millions of stars...

15.5 And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

‘if you are able to count them’. We don't have a response by Abram, but he would say, ‘Well, I can't count them; it's too many.’ It's part of the illustration—and the extent to which God is going to bless. And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be”. No, He is not looking at those that come from Abram, but He is looking down the corridors of history and He will see a multitude of descendants that would have ultimately found their father in Abraham. So He is looking towards the ultimate nation of Israel that was already promised—that he will be a great nation, so many descendants that you cannot even count them. This first illustration is from astrophysics or astronomy.

15.6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then the passage, kind of climactic, rather divides the chapter into two halves. There are some parallels of the 1st 6 verses with the last ones, 7-21. There is a kind of pivot point in verse 6 in terms of a strong statement concerning Abraham:

Then he believed in the LORD. The ‘then’ here, interestingly, is not a sequential ‘then’. In other words, this is probably not the *occasion* when Abraham believed; it is not a ‘vav’ consecutive, it is a different Hebrew construction. Most scholars believe that it is a reference back to what we already talked about, when Abram left Ur of Chaldees, that’s probably the point which we have in verse 6. So, even though in the English it seems to follow sequentially, I think it is a reference back, and a reminder, you might say, of Abram’s initial trusting in Yahweh.

15.6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

God (He) reckoned him as righteousness. And what Paul brings out is that a right relationship with God—we call that justification—is based on faith and faith alone. Abraham is commended—or the writer of Genesis notes that Abraham or Abram believed in the Lord and it is by faith and faith alone—it was the faith (expressed by leaving his home) that brought the righteousness, and we have for the very first time the Biblical word for ‘believe’ or for ‘faith’. So the Hebrew word occurs for the very first time, and it is in reference to Abram. Maybe that is the reason that Paul quotes this verse and indicates that justification has always been by faith, even in the life of Abraham.

Now we mentioned, while we were talking about Adam—I believe that theologically Adam was justified in the same way. It

doesn’t mention or talk about his faith, but we see evidence in the text in the way that He addresses Eve: He calls her the mother of all living, kind of expressing that faith. And I think that Biblically people come into a relationship with God in the OT, NT and future. It’s on the basis of believing what God has said concerning a relationship with Him. So justification *nowhere* is by works; it is always by faith.

Now note that it says that God *reckoned* him as righteous. What does ‘reckoned’ mean? It is an accounting term in Hebrew and Greek. It is the theological idea of *imputation*, the *granting* of righteousness; on the basis of faith God *declares* or grants us His righteousness. Paul brings this out clearly in Romans, the concept or Biblical doctrine of imputation: we stand in a state of righteousness, *positionally*; we are not given or made righteous—we will ultimately be made righteous, but now we are in the process of *growing*, moment by moment, day by day to be more Christlike, you might say, or more righteous in terms of practice or in terms of experience.

But imputation means that we have been *declared* or righteousness had been put to our account. If you want to use the accounting or banking analogy, you could say that in our account is righteousness and as we live out the Christian life, we can draw upon that righteousness that is contained within our account.

That process is *sanctification* where we grow in righteousness and we can experience growth in that area, but positionally we are declared absolutely, totally righteous. We can step out of righteousness when we sin, but in terms of our position nothing can take that away, nothing can remove it from our account. That is why we are secure in our relationship with the Lord, but we can go in and out of fellowship, in and out of that righteous experience, and that is the sanctifying process.

So this concept of *justification by faith* is an OT concept; that’s the point that Paul makes. So Genesis 15.6 is a very important verse. And it is in the context of this covenant that God

> Between Nations - Deuteronomy 7.2 *and when the LORD your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them.*

It can be between nations. In Deuteronomy God told the children of Israel to avoid entering in covenants with pagan nations.

> God and Man - Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Palestinian, Davidic, New Covenant

The interesting thing, as William Albright notes, is that we have some unique covenants. We already saw the Noahic and the Abrahamic and later on further in the OT you will see a Mosaic Covenant, and there will be a Land or Palestinian Covenant, a Davidic and a New Covenant later on in the OT text. But these are unique: God entering into covenant with man, particularly, after the Noahic, the nation of Israel. He is the primary party with the nation of Israel, except for the Noahic.

Covenant

> **Seed** Contract

In the Abrahamic Covenant we see that Abraham and his descendants are the parties also with God as the primary party. And, as we have seen in these first 6 verses, the first stipulation deals with the promise of the *seed*, but once it is a covenant God binds Himself legally to bring about a seed (a supernatural work of God) and this is going to be an *unconditional* covenant which we will see in the following verses.

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 - 1) Promises of Seed 15.1-6
 - 2) Provisions of Land 15.7-21
 - a) Promise of Land 15.7-8

Now we will have the Provisions of the Land at the end of the chapter, but it is started with a Promise of Land in verses 7 and 8.

15.7 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.”

God said to him, I am the LORD, just a historical reminder here, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans,—you have seen My faithfulness, My work, dealing with you all the time...

15.7 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.”

Part of that purpose, in form of a promise to give him this land to possess it. So now it is moving into the *land* stipulation. In verses 1-6 it is the *seed* stipulation and now, in verse 7, it is the *land* stipulation.

15.8 He said, “O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?”

Verse 8: He said, note the same wording as before, O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it? God hasn’t answered as to how this miracle is going to take place. So Abraham asks the question.

Another major stipulation of the Abrahamic Covenant is the *land*.

- > Seed Contract
- > Land

Later on, beginning in verse 18 through the end of the chapter, we have the boundaries, the very legal language dealing with the boundaries of the land in terms of the peoples that occupy the land and the boundaries that it mentions.

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 - 2) Provisions of Land 15.7-21
 - a) Promise of Land 15.7-8
 - b) Preparations for Covenant 15.9-11

Then, the Preparations for the Covenant, 9-11. Next lesson we will get into the actual cutting or the initiating of the covenant itself that will have the stipulation of *seed* and that of land.

15.9 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 turtledove, and a young pigeon."

So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, ... female goat, ... ram, and a turtledove, ... young pigeon. So we have sacrificial animals that are going to be a part of a ceremony that sets this covenant or the initiation of this covenant. It is going to be like signing on the dotted line except it is going to be in terms of the use of these animals and the cutting them in half.

15.10 Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds.

Then we have further instructions: Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two,...

15.10 Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds.

You can imagine the animals, cut in half, the two parts opposite each other, so Abram is following the instructions.

15.11 The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.

The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. We are going to see in verse 12 an interesting phenomenon. Something interesting will take place; it will be the initiating of the covenant. And we will see that Abram is one of the parties, but he is not involved in the ceremony, indicating that this is an *unconditional* covenant. What God is binding Himself to depends solely and totally upon God, not depending on Abram. Abram falls into a deep sleep. In fact God basically puts him to sleep, indicating that it doesn't matter what Abram does because this is going to be an unconditional covenant.

God does not need to make covenants. So this covenant is grace upon grace, assurance upon assurance, quadruple assurance, you might say for Abram where God gives *legal* assurance! He binds Himself legally to perform the stipulations of the covenant. Now historically these covenants over time reveal that prophets demonstrate that God always proves Himself faithful to the covenants that He enters into, binding Himself, not that He needs to but He has chosen to give the children of Israel quadruple assurance.