

Genesis 15:1 - 21

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.’ 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?’ ³ And Abram said, ‘Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.’ 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.’ 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.’ ⁶ Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. 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.’ ⁸ He said, ‘O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?’ 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.’ 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. ¹¹ The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. ¹² Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. ¹⁵ As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete.’ ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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: ¹⁹ the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite ²⁰ and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim ²¹ and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite.’

Historical and Cultural Background

- Notice a few of the links between the last chapter and this one¹:
 - God had just delivered him (Hebrew *miggen* in 14:20), is now his permanent shield (Hebrew *magen* in 15:1). This is the first self-designation of God in the Bible – the solid metaphor of a shield.
 - The king of Sodom said to Abram, ‘Give the people to me and take the *goods* for yourself.’ (14:21)... ‘Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your *reward* shall be very great.’ (15:1b) In Hebrew, the word for ‘goods’ and the word for ‘reward’ are reversals of each other.
 - Abram led 318 men (14:14b), which is the numerical value of the name *Eliezer* (15:2) in Hebrew through gematria, which was a common device in ancient times; *Eliezer* means ‘God is my help’
 - Abram delivered Lot from Chedorlaomer king of Elam, including his family, the people of Sodom, and all their *possessions* (14:16); and God promises to deliver Abram’s descendants from Egypt with many *possessions* (15:14)

¹ John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p.309

- Abram honored and worshiped with *Melchizedek* (meaning ‘my king is *righteousness*’), king of *Salem* (meaning ‘*peace*’) (14:18); and here God reckons faith to Abram as *righteousness* (15:6) and tells him he will go to his fathers in *peace* at a good old age (15:15)
- Melchizedek called God the possessor of *heaven* and earth (14:19, 22); and here God tells Abram to look at the *heavens* and count the stars (15:5)
- Naming an heir: ‘Numerous documents from Nuzi show that it was a well-established custom for a childless person to adopt a stranger, even a slave, as a son. He owed his adoptive parents filial respect, maintained the estate, took care of their physical needs, and performed the funerary rites at their death. In return, the adopted son became the heir to the property.’²
- Ancient covenants involved the sacrifice of an animal. Typically both parties walked between the halves of animal’s slain body, to symbolize, ‘May this be done to me if I do not uphold this covenant.’

² Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, (New York: Schocken, 1966), p.122

Questions

1. Why does God say to Abram, 'Do not fear?' Probably because Abram was wondering if he had just made himself a target by defeating Chedorlaomer and rescuing Lot. Will there be vengeance and reprisal? Also, Abram is afraid that he is getting too old to have children. He's about 80 by this point.
2. What does God's response to Abram suggest about God?
 - a. The 'word of the LORD' in v.1 and v.4 – it's very important that God is *speaking* here, and Abram is responding to God's word. Recall that in Genesis 1, God says what He will do, and He does what He has said. The basis for relating to God is trusting in His word.
 - b. God as a 'shield' is profound. God will protect Abram, and his child, which has got to be a major concern for Abram since he is already old. God will also deliver the Israelites from Egypt and protect them from the Canaanites as described in 15:13 – 21. That has also got to be a major concern for Abram.
 - c. God saying He is a shield also suggests that God going to battle with Israel is defensive, not offensive. He will protect them from being attacked or threatened. When God brought the flood, He was protecting the family of Noah from being killed, because if they died, the line of faith would be extinguished and Jesus could not come. Not only that, God pushed a pause button on their lives until the time Jesus came to them (1 Pet.3:18 – 20; 4:6), so He wasn't consigning them to hell when He took their lives. The same holds true in other episodes when God protects Israel: Egypt, Canaan, etc.
3. How often have we seen Abram speak so far in Genesis? What does he say here and how do you think God could have responded?
 - a. Typically a man can designate anyone to be his heir. So he's doing something that 'makes sense' from a cultural perspective.
 - b. What does it mean that God prevents Abram from naming Eliezer to be his heir? He cuts off that possibility and curtails the ability of a 'patriarch' to name his own heir. That is somewhat challenging because God is taking away some of Abram's cultural power.
 - c. God does not berate Abram or chastise him for struggling to believe. This shows God's patience and understanding and sympathy. This is Abram's first recorded words to God, his first prayer. He is struggling internally to believe what God has promised him. It's okay with God.
4. God also says that this new life will come out of the almost-deadness of Abram's own body. That is challenging to believe.
 - a. Why does Abram believe that? In Gen.14, he had won a major battle with God's help, preserving all lives he took and rescuing many lives from slavery and death. He acted *with* God to deliver Lot. Acting *with* God helps us personally understand God and know God. It's like forgiving others with God helps us personally understand and know God's forgiveness for us. Here, Abram acting with God to deliver Lot helps him believe that God will deliver him – God will bring life out of death from his own body.
 - b. In Gen.13, God protected Sarai in Egypt, affirming the creation order of Genesis 1 – 2. And in Gen.12, Abram probably knew something about the stories passed down to him about this God, especially that God created all things out of nothing. If God could do all these things, then God can bring new life out of death.
 - c. Abram looks at the stars and perhaps is reminded of God's creative power.
 - d. What significance does the number 318 have? The numerical value of names was a common device in ancient times, so it would have occurred to Abram. Eliezer's name probably reminds him of the incident where he took 318 men and fought a major battle without losses because God protected him. This is a subtle and divinely coincidental link to Abram's state of mind and heart. He really does trust God's word.
5. What is the faith of Abram that God declares righteous?
 - a. This is not abstract 'believing that God exists'
 - b. Trust that God will bring life out of death, even in Abram's own body
 - c. Trust in God's word, that God is faithful to fulfill what He says
 - d. See Romans 4:17: 'God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.'
6. Later, how will Jesus' own faith and trust in his heavenly Father be like Abram's faith?
 - a. Jesus will trust that the Father will bring life out of actual death, in Jesus' own body through death into resurrection life

- b. Jesus will trust in the word of the Father in Scripture, that the Father will resurrect him into new life (e.g. Isa.53:10 – 12; Ezk.37)
7. How will the experience of Israel, Abram's descendants also mirror a life out of death experience?
 - a. They will go through enslavement, a kind of death, into new life
 - b. How might Abram have felt about this? This could be the reason why he felt terror and darkness in v.12.
 8. How is our faith in Jesus also a matter of believing that God brings life out of death?
 - a. The life of Jesus is placed by his Spirit into our spiritually dead bodies.
 - b. We must also trust God's word
 - c. We are not just believing that 'God exists.' We are believing certain things about God, that He gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist
 - d. Illus: See the story about Nelson Mandela, below
 - e. Application: Whenever you meet someone who says, 'I believe God exists, but I don't believe in Jesus,' you can say, 'I think what will happen to you is that you'll yearn for a specific God who brings life out of death because this world is dying and we are dying. Believing in a generic God will make you lose interest or get angry, because you'll feel like that god is passively or actively evil. So I would encourage you to look at the very specific God of Jesus, who brings life out of death.'
 9. How could Abram 'believe' and still question God in v.8 to be sure?
 - a. What other kinds of evidence could God have given? A temporary plot of ground?
 - b. What does God give so Abram can be sure? A covenantal promise. This was commonly understood and practiced back then. At first it seems like God is late. But then in another night scene, God places Abram in a deep sleep (the same word used for Adam's sleep). Abram senses great terror and darkness (perhaps the experience of Israel in Egypt?). Then God alone walks through the animal pieces, without Abram. Typically both parties walked through the animal pieces to say, 'May this be done to me if I break my word.' But God alone is doing it. That's really unusual.
 - c. How does this help us trust God? It's rooted in God's own character. It reinforces God's unilateral covenant with Abram. It doesn't mean that the covenant with Israel will be easy for them. But God assures Abram.

<http://ifesworld.org/en/blog/2013/12/mandela-an-enduring-leader>

Mandela: an enduring leader

Dec 10 Posted by Penny Vinden (10 Dec 2013)

When South Africa's former President, Nelson Mandela, died last week, a visibly moved Archbishop Desmond Tutu, long-standing friend of Mandela, cited several incidents that illustrated the great lengths to which 'this incredible icon of magnanimity and compassion' went in seeking reconciliation among the people of South Africa. Jesse Jackson, American civil rights activist and church minister, likewise spoke of Mandela as someone 'who chose reconciliation over retribution.' We asked Septi Bukula, a South African member of IFES International Executive Committee, to reflect on the passing of this great man who has meant so much, not only to South Africans, but to people around the world. [He said,] 'In seeking to discover the influences on Mandela's life, the media largely focuses on his poor upbringing, his education, and his imprisonment. What may be little known, however, is that Christianity, particularly student ministry, played a pivotal role in instilling the values Mr Mandela embodied throughout his life. As a young high school student, he was greatly influenced by the Clarkebury Institute's governor, Reverend G. Harris. He later said that Harris was "an example of a man unselfishly devoted to a good cause ... an important model for me." At the Methodist-founded University of Fort Hare, he recalls that "we were exhorted to obey God." It was there that he joined what was then the IFES movement in South Africa - the Students Christian Association - and also became active in teaching Sunday Bible classes in nearby villages. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mr Mandela recounts the impact of the church on his life: "The Church was as concerned with this world as the next: I saw that virtually all of the achievements of Africans seemed to have come about through the missionary work of the Church." It is a deep and special tribute to Mr Mandela that he carried and embodied these Christian teachings and values throughout his life, overcoming untold suffering, and thereby doing more than most to shape a better world for all humanity.